

The Bardic Type Patreon by Thomas Bell

(29/January/2023 - 30/April/2025)

[MB Saucy Side: 500 Reasons Why \(Featuring Sally\).](#)

[Jan 29, 2023](#)

Salome Alavidze is not perfect.

If you had fallen in love with her the customary way—meeting via a dating app or mutual friends as adults, ambushed by quick-fluttering stomach butterflies of infatuation—then you might have believed she was perfect, at least in the beginning. But you met Sally when you were young, back when “love” was limited to watercolor impression given by Disney movies and desire was a theoretical of which you possessed zero knowledge.

So, no, you never thought that Sally was perfect. You grew up exposed to her imperfections. Her clingy, crybaby nature in elementary school; her braces and nerdy cattiness in junior high. The way that, in high school, she obsessed over the fact that her left breast was a different shape than her right breast and wondered if that rendered her unlovable.

You know Sally’s flaws and insecurities, but they only make you love her all the more. How often does love like that come around, after all? The type of love where you know someone’s past and present so well that envisioning the future together comes as easily as breathing.

Sometimes, however, Sally needs reassurance.

You drop the printed pages on Sally’s desk, the thick stack landing with an audible *thunk* that causes Sally to finally notice your presence. She turns from her canvas (the impressionist painting is either the beginnings of a fruit bowl or boat), splatters of half-dried paint most of her exposed skin.

“What’s all this?” she asks, staring quizzically at the twenty-plus pages. “Don’t tell me it’s tax season already.”

“A list,” you explain, “of all the reasons that I love you.”

“Why would you—” Sally breaks off, her hazel eyes widening. “Is this because what I said last night?”

You nod.

"I was joking," she says. "Like I told you yesterday, I don't really think that you just settled for me."

Despite her words, her smile has the same forced quality as last night, and she avoids fully meeting your gaze. (Sally thinks that staring at someone's forehead tricks them into thinking she's making eye contact, and maybe it does for most people, but not you. You know her too well.)

You decide not to respond to her protest and instead push the list forward so she can read the first thirty-four reasons printed on the first page.

"Seriously, this is sweet," Sally says, "and I do appreciate the effort! But you didn't need to do this." Her apologetic look slips into an amused smile as her eyes land on reason number one.

"*"I love you because you love arguing,"*" she reads with a small laugh. "Hey, that's not true!"

You cross your arms and stare at her pointedly.

"Maybe it's a little true," Sally concedes. She looks back down at the list. "*"Reason number two: I love you because you can admit when you're wrong."*" Her brows lift with surprise. "Huh, and here I thought that I was supposed to be the Precog. You knew exactly how this conversation would go, didn't you?"

You smile at her. "I know *you*."

"*"Reason number three . . ."*" Sally's reading is interrupted as you go to stand behind her chair, your arms wrapping around her shoulders and your chin resting atop her head.

"Keep going," you prod.

Sally strives to ignore you as you twine your fingers through her curls. "*"Reason number three,"*" she reads, "*"you make super cute sounds when I do **this**."*" She pauses. "What's—"

She yelps as you lower your lips to her neck. Her skin tastes like paint and sweat, but you gently suck long enough to leave a mark and for her surprised squeak to turn into a needy whine.

"Keep reading."

She shivers as you whisper into her ear.

"*"Reason number four,"*" she says, voice quivering, "*"you're passionate."*"

You prove the point with your hands, letting them migrate from Sally's shoulders to brush against the sides of her breasts. She moans and leans back into you, but you keep your touch light and teasing. She tilts her head backwards to gaze pleadingly at you, but you simply smile.

"Keep reading," you order.

Sally groans but returns to the paper. “*Reason number five: you’re surprisingly obedient.*” She laughs. “I’m not sure whether I should be offended by the ‘obedient’ part or the ‘surprisingly’.”

“Neither,” you reply. “Look back up at me.”

She obliges, and you take the opportunity to seize her lips in an upside-down kiss. The angle is awkward, with her neck stretched back and you hunched over, but comfort is a secondary concern compared to the need to feel close.

Sally gasps against your lips. “Can we . . .”

“. . . Read the rest of the list later?” you finish, kneeling beside her. “Of course, right after you read out reason six.”

She groans again, the sound husky and petulant, glaring at you heatedly before reading the next item. “*Reason number six: you are endearingly impatient.*’ Okay, hotshot, so you know me. But I wouldn’t be so impatient if you didn’t deliberately tease m—”

She lets out another adorable squeak as your hands slip beneath the hem of her painter’s smock to undo the bra clasp beneath. Sally may bemoan her breasts not being a perfect set, but to you they’re as wonderfully unique as the woman to whom they belong.

Sally helps you pull off her undershirt and remaining clothes, neither of you able to wait to reach the bedroom. Her overeager assistance is awkward and clumsy, adorable and endearing: her elbow gets trapped in a sleeve; her bra clasp catches on the fabric of her shirt. By the time the task is completed, both of you are giggling like teenagers despite the fact you’ve been married for ten years.

The papers on which the list is printed scatter, pushed aside by Sally’s arm and fluttering to the floor of her art studio as you both repurpose the desk for a more urgent engagement than reading.

“Reason number seven,” you recite against her lips, “I love you because you’re affectionate.”

“Reason number eight: I love you because no matter how hard you try to style your hair, your curls are as stubborn as you are.”

“Reason number seventeen: I love how you begin Christmas shopping in July.”

“Reason number twenty-four: I love that you punched Brad Throckmorton in the nose because he was bullying me, even though he was three times your size and two grades above us.”

“Reason number thirty-eight: I love that you wear a different perfume every day of the week.”

“Reason forty-two: I love that you stick store-bought cinnamon rolls in the oven two minutes before company arrives and then try to pass them off as your own homemade recipe.”

“Reason fifty . . .”

Sally arches, and you gasp. Best to skip ahead a few hundred reasons, because neither of you will last through the entire list.

“Reason fifty: I love you because you taught me to love myself.”

[January Update: Mind Blind 2.0, Chapters 13 & 14 \(Now With Zero Construction!\)](#)

[Jan 31, 2023](#)

I’m desperately trying to finish by May, as that will mark *Mind Blind*’s 3-year anniversary. I want to write other stories! Maybe go on vacation before putting on *Delivery for the Damned*, because last year was stressful.

Now that I’ve moved back to Chicago, I’ve finally got a chance to breathe and process and all the events of last year just . . . hit me. Hit me hard. Like a truck, or a really angry duck. I’ve been coping with anxiety, so that’s why I’ve been super quiet on social media (which has always been something that stressed me out). I do need to finally look in my inbox, however, as emulating an ostrich and pretending the world doesn’t exist isn’t long-term viable.

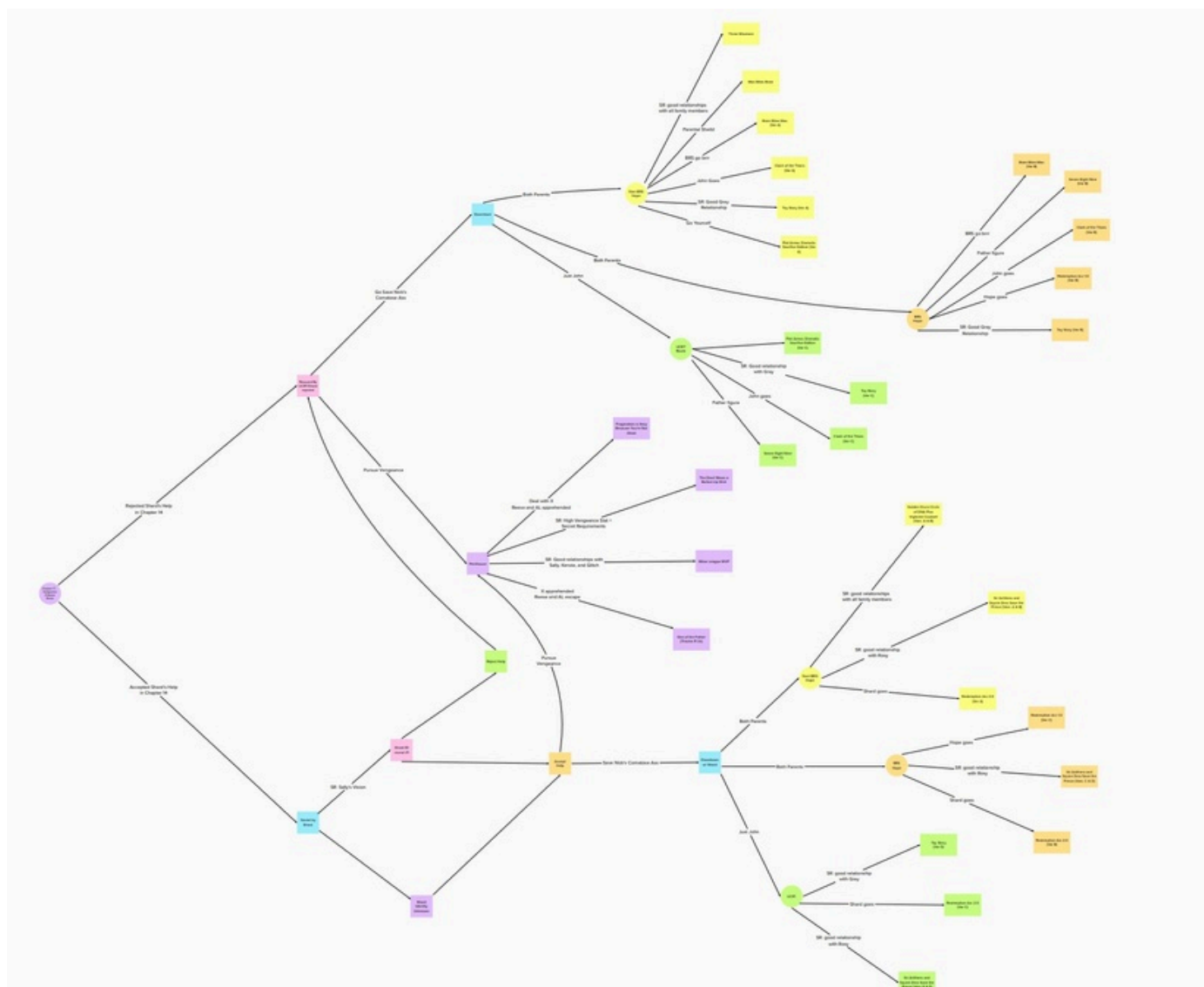
(Heh: *emulating* an ostrich.)

That being said, I do have friends that drag me outside on occasion, which is good because I don’t have the long white beard to fully commit to hermitcore. And I’ll get in a better headspace—I always do! Finishing *Mind Blind* will help with that, as I’m honestly really bummed by how long this project is taking. Working as my mom’s caretaker slowed things down, true, but the main issue is that there’s just . . . so many . . . words.

Too many words, if I’m being honest. Way more words than anyone needs. Next book, I’m dreaming smaller.

Mind Blind currently has over a million words (including coding, though, so average playthrough should only be around 130,000 – 145,000), and I still have a few endings to finish (and then code so that they’re playable).

To give you an idea of what I’m dealing with, here’s my fine-I-give-up-keeping-this-in-my-head chart of all of *Mind Blind*’s endings:



That first purple dot marks Chapter 17, but some of the endings are dependent on stuff that happens as early as Chapter 13. Which is to say . . . It's a lot, and there's a lot of writing. So that's what I'm doing, but I know that I need to also be a better communicator since you guys are what enables me to write in the first place.

(Seriously, *Mind Blind* would've been long abandoned were it not for your support.)

Anyway, I wanted (and kept optimistically promising) to release the grouped Vengeance endings, but I keep adding more because endings aren't necessarily straightforward paths—there's a lot of leaping around, and replay reveals gaps. I wanted to get everything out this January (thus this post happening on the 31, but I refused to admit defeat until I literally ran out of time), Chapter 15 is undergoing rewrites due to events which take place in the “Plot Armor, Dramatic Sacrifice Edition (Var C)” ending, and those changes impact events/code in the “Pragmatism Is Sexy Because You're Not Dead” ending.

Which is to say, it's all such a tangle that's it's hard to release one portion without the rest. The Vengeance endings are almost finalized though, so I should be able to put them up soon. (Granted, I thought that two months ago, but then Caleb unexpectedly bashed AL over the head with his laptop and I rolled with it.)

So I'm stamping "May 2023" as my FINISH EVERYTHING deadline, and will do my best to release chunks as soon as they're ready. Ready meaning "functionally playable." I'm not polishing everything yet in these later chapters because the content is too much in flux.

Anyhow, Mind Blind 2.0 now has Chapters 13 and 14 (link at bottom)! Most of these changes were made months ago, so the changelog is by no means exhaustive as I don't remember everything that I altered 😊

Chapter 13:

1. No more "Under Construction" portions! Branch for Nover!Buttons (Buttons with a super bad relationship with Nick, and who thus didn't realize certain things in Chapter 12) is now fully playable.
2. The option to throw Kenzie under the bus has been (temporarily?) removed while I reevaluate if I actually want to write that pathway (if the juice is worth the squeeze, so to speak). It changes a *huge* amount of the Vengeance-branched endings, basically necessitating two separate versions (so doubling those endings). I started writing it and disliked doing so (because Kenzie is my baby), so put the betray arch to the side and may not pick it up again. Given how many endings there are already (see attached pic), I'm just not sure if I have time to add in yet one more and still finish by May.
3. Reese no longer lets just anyone take the Pollard Machine. For those who are in good enough standing with them to take it, however, there's an additional payoff in Chapter 15.
4. Ace version has been added in for the Kenzie kiss scene (should Button blow their cover with Vengeance).
5. More questions to ask Reese, and new clues regarding certain paperwork (which comes in handy in Chapter 16).

Chapter 14:

1. No more "Under Construction" pathways! Chapter is now double its original length, even with me tidying up and condensing the code.
2. Added in alternative scenes where Button can potentially black out while mind-merging with Shard. High-confidence Buttons get a different version of this scene.
3. Chapter structure been overhauled. Should Button accept Shard's help, only Buttons romancing Gray or Sally will have the later option to let their RO check to make sure that Shard is gone. All Buttons who reject Shard will get the Sally/Gray check, but I felt that it was more impactful to otherwise end the chapter with Shard vanishing unless you're romancing those two (Gray's scene being integral to his "main" romance path).
4. Speaking of romance, Gray's kiss now has an ace pathway (one kiss-avoidant, one not).
5. Shard has new monologues, version dependent on you rejected them, accepted their help, or fainted. (Also on whether they luvvvvvvvvvv you. Reluctantly, and much to their disgust.)
6. Here's a clue, there's a clue, every where's a new clue (albeit, you need to go back to earlier chapters to catch them).

New Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/miind-bliInd/mygame/>

[Live Q&A: January 2023 \(Saturday, 11am\)](#).

[Jan 31, 2023](#)

I intended to schedule the Live Q&A this weekend once I released the Vengeance endings, only for that . . . not to happen.

Sigh.

January's month's Live Q&A will thus be a little late at **Saturday, February 4th** at **11am-12pm PST**.

DM me via discord if you change tiers so I can give you access!

As an apology for the late QA, take this super-spoilerific snippet of Kenzie in Chapter 19 (edited for legibility). This scene is part of the release that I'm trying to get out, but you guys get a taste first :)

(That being said, it is VERY, VERY, VERY spoilery. So stop reading right now unless you're willing to risk that.)

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No, seriously, this spoils a lot of things even if it's redacted.

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Read at your own risk.

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Tobias Zarneki stares calmly at his son. "Calm yourself, Kent," he says. "You're making a scene."

"I'm making a scene?" Kent roars.

You've never witnessed him this animated before, his hands flying and syllables spitting from his lips. His expression fluctuates between rage, hurt, and disbelief, as if he's uncertain what to feel and find none of the emotions satisfactory.

"You have no right to tell me to calm down," Kent says. "You no longer have the right to tell me to do fucking anything, because you . . . you . . ." he trails off, looking lost.

"Say it," Tobias commands.

Kent can't.

You, however, aren't inhibited by familial bonds.

**if (Tobiasass)*

"You're an asshole, Tobias, and . . ."

choice: "We know that you've been funneling city funds to Reese."

Tobias's silver brows arch at your accusation. "I presume that you have proof of this claim?" he drawls. "Otherwise, it would be quite the scandal for the Wisemans' defective daughter to go around accusing politicians of corruption . . . for no other reason than to get even with my son breaking up with you."

Kent gives him a disgusted look. "You're insane if you think that I'd support that story," he says. "That I'd support you."

**if (confidence > 40) and (humor > 40)*

You smirk at Tobias. Did he really expect that little line about being defective to sting? Sure, such insults may hurt when you unwillingly think them about yourself, but that's only because you respect the source.

"I have proof that you've been funneling money from Midway's renovation to Vengeance," you say. "I also have proof that you're the one who told Reese where to find my brother."

Tobias's lips compress in a narrow, disbelieving smile.

"She has me," Kent says, "and my testimony."

For the first time, Tobias's collected façade cracks. "We'll discuss this later, Kent," he says. "Don't make rash declarations."

"There's nothing to discuss, and this 'declaration' is the furthest thing from rash." In contrast to his prior outburst, Kent appears calm. At peace, even. "I've spent years making excuses for you. I knew that you used people. I knew that, sure, you were a shit father, but I believed that you were at least a decent human being. I even stupidly thought that you supported me when I told you that I wanted to join Unity and make sure what happened with Mom never repeated."

Kent chuckles bitterly, but it doesn't disguise the fact his heart has just been shattered. "I should have known that I was just another tool."

[New Chapter 14 Shard Scene](#)

[Jan 31, 2023](#)

For those of you who don't want to replay all fourteen chapters (I don't blame you!), here's one of the new Shard monologues from the demo update! I think there are . . . between six and eight? I can't actually remember the number, because I have the memory of . . .

I can't remember how I wanted to end that joke.

Anyway! I'm sharing the monologue for Buttons who are on Shard's romance path and accepted their assistance, since those of you romancing the other ROs won't see this version :)

Feedback is appreciated, as I want to make sure that Shard's perspective has a different "voice" despite staying in second person (which I'm still not totally wed to).

Major spoiler below, obviously, so read with caution!

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The mental tether between \${Name} and you snaps, your weary mind unable to maintain the connection.

To your horror, the silence feels almost lonely. When did constantly hearing \${Name}'s thoughts begin to feel so . . . comforting?

No.

That's a possibility upon which you refuse to dwell. You don't deserve to imagine such things.

Still, the selfish part of you is tempted to reach out and make sure that \${she}'s alright.

**if (coverblown)*

But casting your mind several floors down, usually an insignificant distance for your brainrange, now feels like racing an Olympic marathon.

**if (coverblown = false)*

But casting your mind across those three hundred yards, usually an insignificant distance for your brainrange, now feels racing like an Olympic marathon.

You withdraw the pack of antacids from your back pocket, hands trembling as you unwrap the foil.

**if (coverblown)*

Every bone in your body weighs twice as much, and the effort expended by chewing four tablets is enough to make you slump in your chair with a pained groan.

**if (coverblown = false)*

Every bone in your body weighs twice as much, and the effort expended by chewing four tablets is enough to make you slump against the steering wheel with a pained groan.

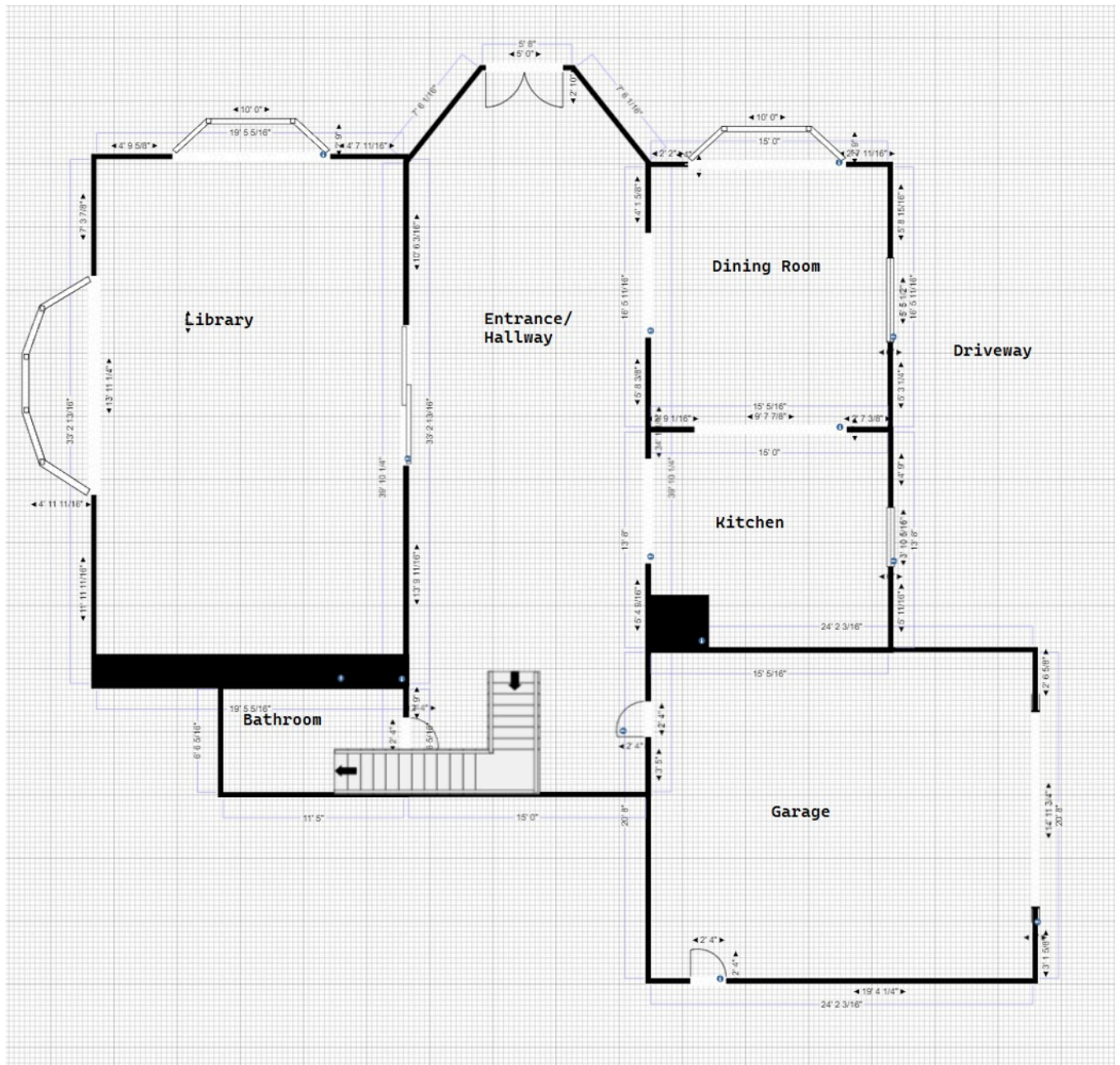
The powdered antacids fizz in your mouth for a few seconds before you muster enough energy to swallow.

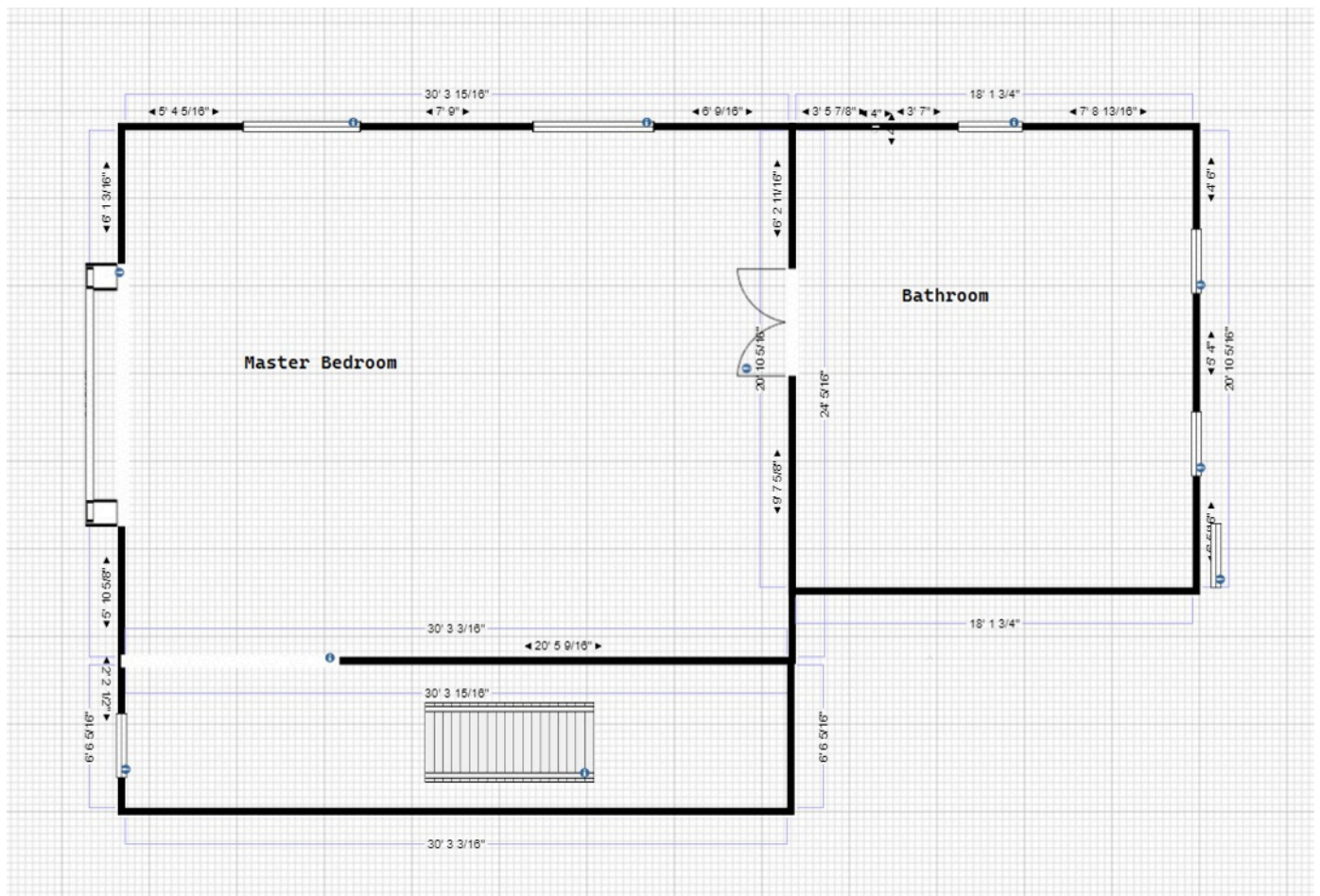
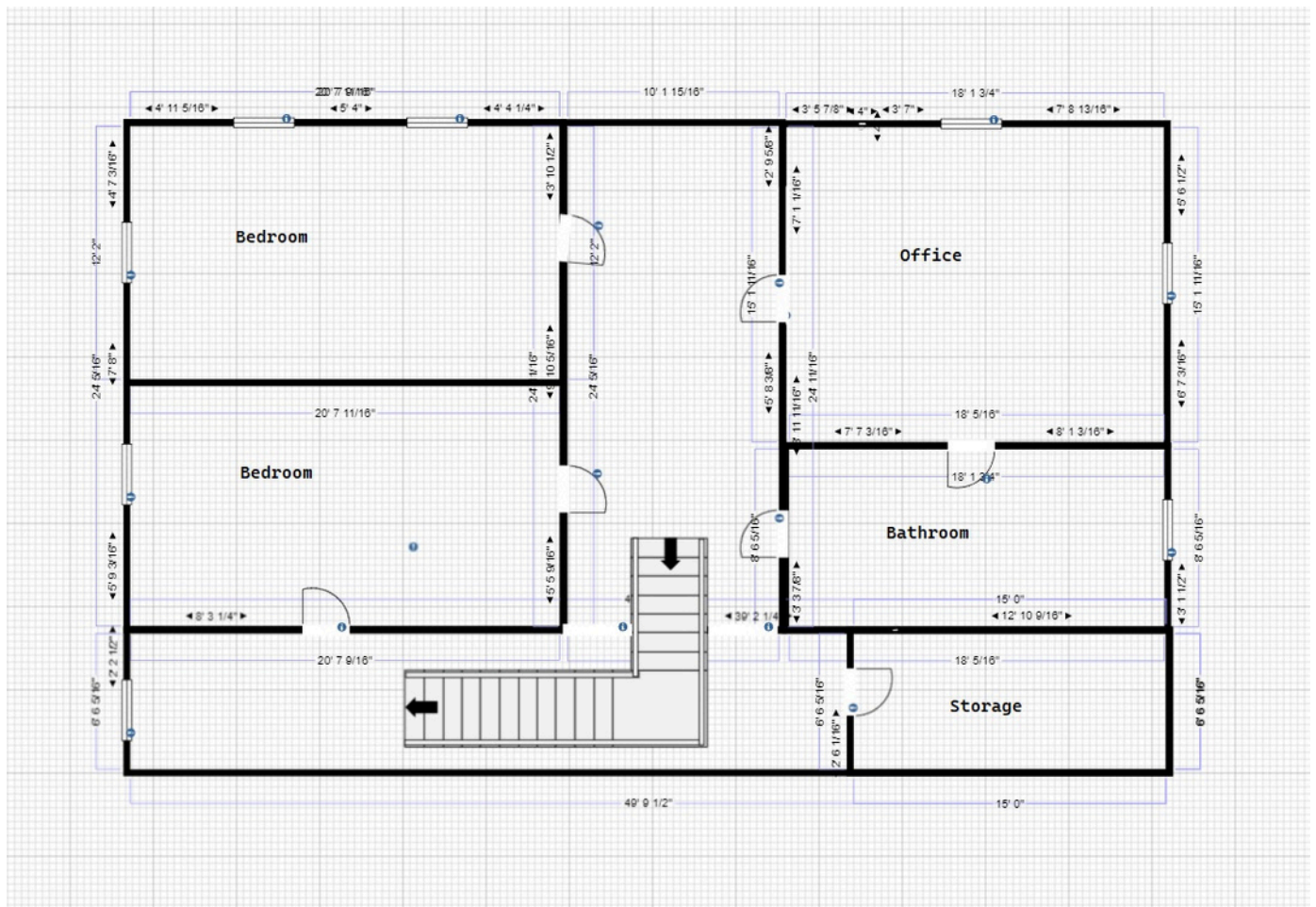
You almost killed yourself. Testing the limits of your brainrange so recklessly? Both stupid and impulsive, two traits which you normally pride yourself on being exempt. Yet prior to tonight, you never reached out more than a few blocks, a remnant of terrified childhood conviction that your mind might one day wander too far, and you would lose it completely.

Perhaps you've already lost your mind. That, at least, would explain why you took such an asinine risk.

Yes, saving Nicholas Wiseman is a priority, but there was no certainty your plan would work. To be truthful (if only to yourself), you're shocked that it [i]did[i] work. \${Name}'s mind allowed you to peer into the thoughts of other Ments, acting like an echo chamber that amplified the thoughts within; it's yet another truth which Unity would undoubtably bury should they ever learn.

There's no point in reminiscing over the past.





[Feb 21, 2023](#)

A heist, you say? 🙄

(Just ignore the extremely wonky dimensions. They should be too small to read within the game.)

[MB Saucy Side: Not a Boat \(Kent and Ferro Version\)](#)

[Feb 28, 2023](#)

Ferro slides your pants down your thighs—you shimmy a little to help him get the fabric over your knees, raising your legs up from the bed so he can strip them off completely. Once the task is accomplished, Ferro carelessly tosses your clothes to the other side of the bedroom, too absorbed staring at your body revealed form to notice where they land.

"I will touch you with my mind," he murmurs.

You're tempted to make a joke about that seeming to be more Gray's talent until you realize that Ferro is quoting a poem.

"Touch you and touch and touch until you . . ."

Contrary to his words, Ferro's hands remain distant from your bared skin, clenched at his side in a frustrating show of restraint. You bite your lower lip and attempt to look tempting, smugly noting Ferro's dry swallow. Alas, he seems determined to finish the poem before fulfilling his promise to touch you.

"Give me suddenly a smile," Ferro quotes, *"shyly obscene."*

"E. E. Cummings."

Your head turns on the pillow to find the second voice. Leaning nonchalantly against the bedroom door, Kent smirks back at you. He looks exactly as he did the very first morning you two met: which is to say, he's wearing nothing but a towel.

Oh.

So you're having one of **those** dreams again.

"Cummings seemed like the appropriate poet for the moment," Ferro drawls, completely unphased by his best friend's presence.

Kent's lets out a low "hmm" of amused agreement, his eyes remaining fixated on you. He takes a step closer, the towel sliding off his lean hips then vanishing the way objects do in dreams once they're no longer necessary. Another step, and your breath hitches with anticipation as he looms over you.

Kent reaches out, his fingertips caressing the line of your collarbone. He's hardly touching you, and yet you can feel shockwaves from the contact all the way down to your curling toes.

"Beautiful," Kent murmurs. "Perfect." He leans down and captures your mouth with his own, his tongue sliding in and his teeth dragging your lower lip. The kiss lasts until you begin feeling heady from a lack of oxygen.

"*Mine*," Kent announces with a pointed glare at Ferro.

Even in dreams, Kent doesn't like sharing his toys.

Ferro rolls his eyes. "I was here first," he points out. Unlike Kent, he's still clothed; Ferro is always the shy one when you have dreams like this, whereas Kent wouldn't know modesty if it kidnapped his dogs.

"Gentlemen, please!" you exclaim, spreading wide your arms. "My imagination has enough room for you both."

Unfortunately, your imagination also knows Ferro and Kent well enough that even their dream counterparts are never fully at ease with each other's presence.

. . . But a little competition isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Kent dedicates himself your lips, hungry and consuming as he tries to lay claim to all of your attention. He lays down beside you, hands cupping behind your head and his short nails raking over your scalp in rhythm with the demanding push and retreat of his tongue. His expression—worshipful and greedy—is all you can see.

Kent isn't, however, all that you can *feel*.

Ferro is more patient, taking his time to explore the rest of your body. His lips press first against your inner ankles, light and teasing kisses gradually climbing higher until he becomes fascinated with the inner crook of your knees. You've never really paid attention to the area, an oversight which only serves to heighten the soft skin's sensitivity to touch. His thumbs rub circles that send a jolt of electricity up your spine and make your back arch. With a pleased laugh, Ferro grips behind your lower thighs and props your hips off the mattress.

"Be gentle," Kent warns.

"I'm always gentle," Ferro counters.

You glance downwards to see Ferro's expression. His lips curve in an impish, lopsided smile when your eyes lock, and then—abruptly, without warning—he lifts your legs up further in the air and gives your ass a light *smack*.

"I'm usually gentle," Ferro amends, chuckling.

You giggle as well, the mood instantly changing from charged to playful. Wanting to tease back, you wiggle against Ferro's hips and elicit an approving groan.

"Have mercy, babe," Ferro pleads.

Kent's chest rumbles with a growl, jealous of the easy intimacy between you and Ferro, and his lips reclaim yours. His behavior is a bit caveman, but Kent's kiss is soft and tender enough to make you forget all needing to divide your attention equally. Kent props himself up on his elbows above you, his lips and tongue and teeth laying utter claim to your focus.

"Alright, that's enough." Ferro's tone is a little testy. "It's my turn on the top deck, Kenzie."

"Not a boat," Kent grumbles against your lips, but he does reluctantly break away to silently seek your preference.

You gather just enough wherewithal to dazedly nod. Fair's fair, after all.

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The next morning, Nick eyes you knowingly over the rim of his coffee mug.

"Sleep well?" he asks.

You stiffen. Nick used to overhear your nightmares when you were a child, but only because they were particularly vivid. Most dreams, your brother doesn't see. He probably didn't see this one either.

That's right. Be optimistic! You're just being paranoid.

"You're not being paranoid," Nick says bluntly. "But don't worry—I headed to Gray's before witnessing anything that would scar me for life."

You groan and rest your forehead on the kitchen table, avoiding eye contact.

Nick chuckles. "One of these days, you might actually want to ask one of them out on a date. Seems to me like you at least owe Kent and Glitch dinner for services rendered."

"I hate you," you say without lifting your head.

"But you *love* . . ." Nick begins before falling silent. "If it helps you feel even, you can look at my internet browsing history."

"I want nothing less," you reply. "Let's just pretend this never happened."

"Of course," Nick says, but the corner of his mouth twitches.

You sigh. "One last joke, and then this conversation is *over*."

"Deal." Nick cracks his knuckles as if winding up for a pitch. "Hey, Button?"

"Yes, Nick?" you answer dutifully, hating your life.

"Good luck choosing a captain."

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You groan and rest your forehead on the kitchen table, avoiding eye contact.

Nick chuckles. "One of these days, you might actually want to ask one of them out on a date. Seems to me like you at least owe Kent and Glitch dinner for services rendered."

"I hate you," you say without lifting your head.

"But you *love* . . ." Nick begins before falling silent. "If it helps you feel even, you can look at my internet browsing history."

"I want nothing less," you reply. "Let's just pretend this never happened."

"Of course," Nick says, but the corner of his mouth twitches.

You sigh. "One last joke, and then this conversation is *over*."

"Deal." Nick cracks his knuckles as if winding up for a pitch. "Hey, Button?"

"Yes, Nick?" you answer dutifully, hating your life.

"Good luck choosing a captain."

[MB Saucy Side: Not a Boat \(Kenna and Talia Version\)](#)

[Feb 28, 2023](#)

Talia slides your pants down your thighs—you shimmy a little to help her get the fabric over your knees, raising your legs up from the bed so he can strip them off completely. Once the task is accomplished, Talia carelessly tosses your clothes to the other side of the bedroom, too absorbed staring at your body revealed form to notice where they land.

"I will touch you with my mind," she murmurs.

You're tempted to make a joke about that seeming to be more Gray's talent until you realize that Talia is quoting a poem.

"Touch you and touch and touch until you . . ."

Contrary to her words, Talia's hands remain distant from your bared skin, clenched at her side in a frustrating show of restraint. You bite your lower lip and attempt to look tempting, smugly noting Talia's dry swallow. Alas, she seems determined to finish the poem before fulfilling her promise to touch you.

"Give me suddenly a smile," Talia quotes, "shyly obscene."

"E. E. Cummings."

Your head turns on the pillow to find the second voice. Leaning nonchalantly against the bedroom door, Kenna smirks back at you. She looks exactly as he did the very first morning you two met: which is to say, she's wearing nothing but a towel.

Oh.

So you're having one of **those** dreams again.

"Cummings seemed like the appropriate poet for the moment," Talia drawls, completely unphased by her best friend's presence.

Kenna's lets out a low "hmm" of amused agreement, her eyes remaining fixated on you. She takes a step closer, the towel sliding off her breasts and lean hips then vanishing the way objects do in dreams once they're no longer necessary. Another step, and your breath hitches with anticipation as she looms over you.

Kenna reaches out, her fingertips caressing the line of your collarbone. She's hardly touching you, and yet you can feel shockwaves from the contact all the way down to your curling toes.

"Beautiful," Kenna murmurs. "Perfect." She leans down and captures your mouth with her own, her tongue sliding in and her teeth dragging your lower lip. The kiss lasts until you begin feeling heady from a lack of oxygen.

"Mine," Kenna announces with a pointed glare at Talia.

Even in dreams, Kenna doesn't like sharing her toys.

Talia rolls her eyes. "I was here first," she points out. Unlike Kenna, she's still clothed; Talia is always the shy one when you have dreams like this, whereas Kenna wouldn't know modesty if it kidnapped her dogs.

"Ladies, please!" you exclaim, spreading wide your arms. "My imagination has enough room for you both."

Unfortunately, your imagination also knows Talia and Kenna well enough that even their dream counterparts are never fully at ease with each other's presence.

. . . But a little competition isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Kenna dedicates herself your lips, hungry and consuming as she tries to lay claim to all of your attention. She lays down beside you, hands cupping behind your head and her short nails raking over your scalp in rhythm with the demanding push and retreat of her tongue. Her expression—worshipful and greedy—is all you can see.

Kenna isn't, however, all that you can *feel*.

Talia is more patient, taking her time to explore the rest of your body. Her lips press first against your inner ankles, light and teasing kisses gradually climbing higher until she becomes fascinated with the inner crook of your knees. You've never really paid attention to the area, an oversight which only serves to heighten the soft skin's sensitivity to touch. Her thumbs rub circles that send a jolt of electricity up your spine and make your back arch. With a pleased laugh, Talia grips behind your lower thighs and props your hips off the mattress.

"Be gentle," Kenna warns.

"I'm always gentle," Talia counters.

You glance downwards to see Talia's expression. Her lips curve in an impish, lopsided smile when your eyes lock, and then—abruptly, without warning—she lifts your legs up further in the air and gives your ass a light *smack*.

"I'm usually gentle," Talia amends, chuckling.

You giggle as well, the mood instantly changing from charged to playful. Wanting to tease back, you wiggle against Talia's hips and elicit an approving groan.

"Have mercy, babe," Talia pleads.

Kenna's chest rumbles with a growl, jealous of the easy intimacy between you and Talia, and her lips reclaim yours. Her behavior is a bit cavewoman, but Kenna's kiss is soft and tender enough to make you forget all needing to divide your attention equally. Kenna props herself up on her elbows above you, her lips and tongue and teeth laying utter claim to your focus.

"Alright, that's enough." Talia's tone is a little testy. "It's my turn on the top deck, Kenzie."

"Not a boat," Kenna grumbles against your lips, but she does reluctantly break away to silently seek your preference.

You gather just enough wherewithal to dazedly nod. Fair's fair, after all.

* * * *

* * * *

The next morning, Nick eyes you knowingly over the rim of his coffee mug.

“Sleep well?” he asks.

You stiffen. Nick used to overhear your nightmares when you were a child, but only because they were particularly vivid. Most dreams, your brother doesn’t see. He probably didn’t see this one either.

That’s right. Be optimistic! You’re just being paranoid.

“You’re not being paranoid,” Nick says bluntly. “But don’t worry—I headed to Gray’s before witnessing anything that would scar me for life.”

You groan and rest your forehead on the kitchen table, avoiding eye contact.

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“Yes, Nick?” you answer dutifully, hating your life.

“Good luck choosing a captain.”

[MB Short Story: Procrastination Pizza](#)

[Feb 28, 2023](#)

In preparation for Nick’s discharge from the hospital, you and Sally are in the middle of stripping the sheets on his bed when your cellphones vibrate simultaneously.

“Sweet virgin Mary protect us,” Sally whispers as she stares at the text.

You can't fault her sudden conversion to Catholicism—you'd sacrifice a goat to Baphomet if it meant protection from *that*.

The photo Nick sent in the group chat has a simple caption: "Abomination."

That single word fails to capture the Lovecraftian horror of what your eyes are still struggling to comprehend . . . The image goes beyond mere "abomination." It's an obscenity, an anathema, a violation of all that is good and pure.

It's a slice of pepperoni pizza covered in ketchup.

Sally's hands are shaking as she sets her cellphone down on the nearby nightstand. You both glare at the offending device which delivered so grotesque a message.

"Who's turn was it to visit Nick for lunch?" You refuse voice the question that you really need to ask: which of your friends do you have to break up with because they decided *that* was acceptable to feed your brother.

"Gray, I think," Sally replies. "But I've seen him eat pizza before. He would never . . ."

Your stomach sinks with foreboding and nausea. Could Grayson have gone insane? Is insanity justification to profane perfection?

"I just don't understand why someone would do this," you say weakly.

Sally picks her phone back up gingerly with two fingers, as if the image is contagious. She squints at Nick's message. "Maybe it's a random internet snapshot?"

You peak over her shoulder, shuddering as you force yourself to stare directly at the snapshot like a hero gazing into Cthulhu's toothy maw.

"No, the background is Nick's hospital room. Someone did this to him." Your voice rises, taking on an edge of hysteria. "Hasn't my brother been through enough?!"

"Maybe it was an accident," Sally whispers. "A dreadful accident."

You both look back at Nick's text. There's no way the zigzag squiggle of ketchup atop the lightly browned cheese got there by mistake.

"This was no accident," you say grimly. "This was an attack."

* * * *

"Stop being ridiculous," Kim orders over your phone speaker. "I haven't been to visit your brother since last Thursday when his nurse caught me smuggling in kung pao chicken."

The Profane Pizza Incident was the result of good intentions. After Nick disclosed that he was sick of hospital food, you enlisted the members of Operation Hemera on a new mission: to bring your brother lunch from his favorite restaurants. Technically, Nick is still supposed to be on a limited diet, but the doctors clearly don't know your brother. Recovery is fifty percent mental, and Nick is too much a gourmand to ever get better while being forced to live off unsalted grits and orange jell-o cups.

"Someone did this to him," you tell Kim. "And you . . ."

Kim cuts you off. "Did not."

"So you claim. But if anyone is going to poison Nick, it would be you."

"Goodbye, Wiseman." You can hear Kim's eyeroll as he hangs up.

* * * *

"Is it really that unusual?" Grayson asks after you show up at his condo. "Pizza already has tomato sauce, and ketchup is made out of—"

"It's not the *same*, Gray," Sally growls, crossing her arms. "How can you not understand that?"

Gray looks at you as if expecting backup, but you're nodding sagely at Sally's point. He throws up his arms in bewildered defeat.

"Nick's probably just messing with you," he says.

You and Sally look at him condescendingly.

"And you call yourself his best friend," Sally scoffs.

"Nick would *never* deliberately ruin food," you add. "Accidentally while cooking, sure. But on purpose? No. Someone did this to him, and I intend to discover the culprit."

"Did you ask Nick?" Gray says.

Of course not! You love your brother too much to make him relive the trauma.

* * * *

Glitch knows something.

You know that she knows something because she keeps bursting into giggles during your very serious Skype interrogation regarding The Profane Pizza Incident. Sally and you are sitting on Gray's couch, having claimed his condo as your operation headquarters while Gray, appearing confused, went to fetch you both cappuccinos from the coffee shop across the street (detective work requires caffeine, after all).

“Exactly how bored are you two?” Glitch inquires.

Sally glares down her small nose at the videocall. “We don’t do this because we’re bored,” she intones solemnly.

“We do it because it’s right,” you say.

“Are you trying to procrastinate cleaning the house?” Glitch wonders. “Nick’s due back next week, after all, and the place was kind of a mess last time I visited.”

Damn her insightfulness.

“That’s completely unrelated,” you say stiffly, as if offended by the very notion that you and Sally would make a big deal out of something totally banal for no other reason than to avoid vacuuming.

“Completely unrelated,” Sally echoes. “Stop stalling, Parker, and tell us what you know!”

“Never!” Glitch dramatically declares. “I’ll die first!”

Sally cracks her knuckles. “That can be arranged.”

Your friend sounds a little too serious, and you place your hand over her clenched fists, lowering them back down to her lap.

“No one needs to get hurt here,” you coax Glitch. “Just tell us who ruined Nick’s pizza.”

Glitch’s lips compress together, holding back both her secrets and an amused smile.

“I would never betray them,” she says.

You and Sally exchange knowing looks. There’s only one person who Glitch would ever go out of her way to protect.

* * * *

Kent is still in Nick’s hospital room when you and Sally arrive. Some investigators might argue that the hospital is where you should’ve begun your search for the culprit, but that would’ve defeated the whole point of your investigation.

“Fiend!” Sally shouts, thrusting her finger into Kent’s face. “We caught you red-handed!” She glances down at the small ketchup packet that Kent’s in the middle of squeezing over another slice of pizza, and her face crinkles with disgust.

“Literally,” she adds.

“Uh . . .” Nick pushes himself up off his pillows to get a better view of you still standing in the doorway. “Everything okay, Button?”

You can’t answer him. Your lips won’t move, your brain won’t work. The half-empty cappuccino in your hand shakes.

Because your brother—your smart, bon-vivant brother with his five-level spice rack and love of food—is *eating* (an appearing to enjoy) a pizza slice with ketchup.

Nick chuckles as he overhears your thoughts.

“Wow,” he says. “Anything to avoid cleaning, huh?”

He lifts his pizza off the paper plate with the pizzeria’s logo (a singular moustache), tilting it so you gain a better view of the heart drawn atop the cheese in ketchup. “I admit, it’s not something I would usually do. But Kent told me that his grandparents always put ketchup on their pizza, and I had a few packets left over from yesterday’s burger run . . . so I figured why not at least try it?”

“It’s not exactly like zapiekanki,” Kent says. “But close.”

“Zapi-what?” Sally repeats.

“Polish street food,” Kent says. “My grandparents made it for me growing up.”

Loathe though you are to ridicule Kent’s childhood favorite, the fact remains that he puts ketchup on his pizza. Can your friendship survive this description of dough and cheese?

Nick snorts. “It’s no weirder than corndogs,” he points out, “or sweet potato casserole.”

“Peanut butter and jelly,” Kent adds, pulling a face.

Yes, but those are unholy food combinations to which you’re accustomed. And pizza was already perfect.

“Pizza already has tomato sauce!” Sally seems to take the revelation that Kent and Nick are enjoying ketchup pizza even worse than you. “Why would you ruin it by adding more salt?”

Kent takes a bite of his pizza, ignoring Sally’s finger still accusatorily hovering in front of his face.

“It’s good,” he answers.

“Want to try a piece, Button?” Nick asks.

“Sorry,” you say. “We should get back, uh, get back to the house.”

The house, with its unmade beds and unvacuumed floors and empty fridge. That house.

Ugh.

Your attempts at procrastination thwarted by ketchupy pizza, Sally and you begrudgingly return home . .

.

And call a cleaning service.



[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions In Letters](#)

[Mar 8, 2023](#)

An email from Nicholas Wiseman to his mother, Hope Wiseman, 2.5 years prior to Mind Blind.

Deleted text is shown.

Comic Sans was used unrepentantly.

Hey Mom!

Sorry that I haven't been around to visit lately. Adsila has determined that I need an a suitably heroic track record if I'm ever going to deserve filling Dad's shoes. When I joked that would never happen, since I'm a size 12 and Dad wears a 10, she gave me a death glare straight out of your playbook.

No wonder you two are besties. (When I made that observation to Adsila, her glare intensified—as did my conviction that you two must've developed *The Look* together for maximum soul-sapping of its intended targets. Did you critique her narrowness of squint? Did she make suggestions on the perfect angle at which to look down your nose? Either way, you're both admirably terrifying.)

But like I was saying: Addy's been assigning me on whatever mission she thinks will make headlines, mostly to D.C. and L.A. to protect big-name Ments from threats. I swear, the more time I spend with actors and politicians, the less difference I can find between the two careers. I dunno why you loved political dinners so much; the last one I attended, while on protection detail for a senator, was so boring that I almost nodded off into my dessert. Still not convinced Senator Mallory is actually an Empath, even after seeing Vengeance's threats against him. No Empath could spend thirty minutes on such a dull-as-dishwater speech and remain oblivious to his audience's quiet suffering (not so quiet, when the home secretary let out a snore).

On the bright side, the sachertorte was swoon-worthy, and I've been trying to recreate the recipe at home for Button.

Button stays at Salome's whenever I'm on assignment, but I'm thinking about asking Matteo if he'd be okay letting them just stay at our place together since it's closer to their high school and that way Button can borrow my car without having to park streetside. Button complains that I worry too much, and I figure having the condo to themselves for a week or so every month might help them not feel as stifled.

I don't exactly trust Button and Salome not to burn down the condo, but whatever. I have decent insurance.

Once I join UCRT (if Adsila ever lets Bailey retire to go live in New Jersey with his grandkids), I'm probably going to buy my own place. Not that the condo you and Dad bought us isn't great—the location is perfect. But Button's talking about maybe getting a dog, and that requires a backyard. Not sure when either of us would have time for a pet since I'm gone every other week and Button will graduate next year, but I want it to at least be an option for Button if they and Sally decide to attend college in Chicago.

Plus, I want a better kitchen.

[River Dyeing \(Saint Patrick Edition\)](#)

[Mar 17, 2023](#)

Note:

This story takes place a few months before The Pencil Incident made everyone realize the full ramifications of Button's mind blindness.

It also includes a few subtle teasers for some of Mind Blind's endings.

Regrettably, no Vengeance members were harmed in the making of this story. For context, Chicago dyes its waterways green every Saint Patrick's Day.

* * * *

"Daddy, there's too many *people*."

The girl's whisper went unheard, lost beneath the crowd's raucous cheers and bagpipers playing "Danny Boy" in the key of Extremely Flat. Her father was laughing at a parade float behind the bagpipers, its large balloon rainbow deflating over an anxious-looking group of leprechauns due to someone from behind the tapeline having pelted the balloon with a half-filled beer can.

Although the girl's words weren't audible, a teenage boy immediately took her hand. He was perhaps six years older than her, thirteen or fourteen, gangly and awkward, with unruly hair and a black T-shirt at odds with the sea of green around them.

"Are you okay, Button?" he asked.

Button shook her head, eyes squinting closed as if to block out her surroundings.

Nick, there's too many people, she repeated. *They're all going to laugh at me.*

No one will laugh at you, Nick promised. He forced himself to smile, knowing that his sister would sense his frustration if he let it leak. For someone the opposite of an empath, Button was inconveniently intuitive.

It was infuriating, though. His little sister hadn't been this self-aware until a kid named Alan (and whom Nick simply thought of as "Little Shit") joined her class. Little Shit was a Ment, and had no qualms over letting Button know that he thought that *her thoughts* were dumb with stereotypic second-grader eloquence.

Button's pudgy fingers tightened their grip on Nick's hand.

They're going to learn that I failed my last spelling test, she thought, *and everyone will think that I'm stupid.*

At this point, their father had begun listening in on their mental conversation.

"Come on now," John Wiseman interjected jovially. "Enough doom and gloom, sprout! Or you'll grow up to be a weepy willow."

Nick winced. Ever since their dad had taken up gardening, his puns had developed a cringe botanical bent. Was there a more embarrassing father in all of existence? Nick thought not.

"It's a *weeping* willow, Daddy," Button corrected, raising her voice to be heard over the crowd. "Not weepy."

Button always corrected her family out loud, despite being perfectly content to communicate mentally most other times. It was Nick's favorite quality about her when directed at their parents. Less so when she criticized Nick's homework.

"You're so smart," John told Button, suppressing a smile. "No one would ever laugh at such a smart girl."

Button chewed her lower lip. "Even though I failed my spelling test?"

"Even though you were too sick to study the week before your spelling test," John replied. "It's not your fault that you had the flu."

"It was the virus's fault!" Button said.

"Exactly." John's face contorted in an overexaggerated glower. "Dirty rotten virus! How dare you make my precious daughter sick!"

Button giggled.

"We talked about this," John added, his voice gentle but firm. "You wanted to come to the parade, didn't you?"

"Yes," Button admitted.

"And here we are! You can't let fear of people hearing your thoughts stop you from having fun."

"But Mom said that—" Button broke off, gazing guiltily down at her sneakers.

A muscle in John's cheek tightened, which Nick took as his cue to lighten the mood. He didn't know exactly what Button had overheard, but his mom was a notorious worrywart. Sure, Button had weirdly loud thoughts. It wasn't that big of deal, especially to Nick.

Button's condition was still occasionally annoying—she got REALLY loud when she was upset— but Nick had learned to tune most her thoughts out (perhaps not quite as well as their dad, but John had the advantage of a limited brainrange). His sister's mind blindness might mean that she got bullied by assholes like Little Shit, but it didn't put her at any physical risk.

At least Button didn't have to deal with daily nosebleeds.

Being heard? That was comparatively harmless.

* * * *

"It's true," Nick lied. "They use Mountain Dew to dye the river green."

Button's cheeks puffed out belligerently. "That's not true!" she argued. "Daddy, Nick is being a liar!"

John yawned; he'd stayed late at the office last night finishing a mission brief so as to have today off. "Stop being a liar, Nick."

"I'm not a liar," Nick lied. "It really is Mountain Dew."

Button glanced warily over the guardrail. John's fame had managed to secure a last-minute lunch seating despite the crush at *Vigo's By The Water*, a pizzeria which compensated for its lack of fine cuisine with the fact that it was by the water. Their view of the river swirling with neon green was as delightful as their pasta was bland.

"It is the same color as Mountain Dew," Button begrudgingly observed. "But isn't soda bad for the fishes?"

"It's not Mountain Dew," John said. "Nick, what did I say about lying to your sister?"

Nick rolled his eyes. His parents always said that he shouldn't deceive Button because she didn't have the luxury of being able to do the same, but they were overreacting as usual. And being hypocritical, since there were some things that they expected Nick to *always* lie about no matter what.

Parents were dumb.

"Is it really Mountain Dew?"

Button stared at Nick with wide, pleading eyes. A twinge of guilt—how he hated that familiar sensation!—plucked at his conscience. Maybe it was unfair to mess with Button, even if it was one of the greatest joys of being an older sibling.

"No," Nick conceded. "It's not really Mountain Dew."

"I knew it!" Button exclaimed. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!"

"Yeah, well, you almost believed me."

"I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it, I knew—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Wiseman. Sir?"

Nick looked up from his spaghetti to see the waiter addressing his father. The water pitcher in the waiter's hand shook, which was odd because their glasses were all filled.

"Our meals are fine," John said politely. "Thank you for checking in, though."

"No, sir, that's, er, not why I'm here." The waiter cleared his throat. "I'm so sorry, sir. You've been nothing but kind, and my son will love the autograph, but today's lunch rush is incredibly busy and, well . . ." A bead of sweat trickled down his temple.

"Is there a problem?" John asked, an edge entering his voice.

"Not that I'm aware of, sir!" The waiter's eyes darted in Button's direction. "I know that children can be loud. I have a son of my own, did I mention? But, well, you see . . ."

He sighed. "There have been complaints, sir. Multiple."

John set his napkin on the table. "Nicky, why don't you and Button go to the observation deck and take a few pictures of the river dyeing for Mom? She'd appreciate the thought—I know she was disappointed to be on call today and miss out on the parade."

Button looked at her father, her small face serious. "Daddy, is this because of me?"

"Of course not, peanut," John lied. "It's because I'm Justice." He gave the waiter a hard look. "Other customers have been making a commotion over my presence, haven't they?"

"That's not quite . . ." The waiter gulped.

"Haven't they?" John repeated.

The waiter's head bobbed up and down like a chicken facing the execution block. "Exactly so, sir!"

Apparently, deceiving Button was only morally wrong when Nick did it.

Nick stood and offered Button his hand. "Come on," he said. "Let's go take pictures of Mountain Dew River for mom."

[Mind Blind 2.0: Chapter 15 Update](#)

[Mar 30, 2023](#)

Chapter 15's final form is over 80,000 words. 😞

That's the size of a whole novel. I'm both proud of and annoyed by my inability to curtail my ambition. I'm making good progress, though, and am still aiming to release all the endings by May! All are written (albeit not coded), except for the two where a certain vigilante ends up to jail (I need to emotionally brace myself to write those, I think).

(Ideally, I'll release the Vengeance endings first as planned, but it's a tangled spiderweb of code and I've been out of adhd meds for the past two month. It's incredible how much better track I can keep of the branching narrative since my pharmacy got my prescription back in stock last week.)

(Warning: Spoilers for Chapter 15 ahead! Link at the bottom of post.)

Chapter 15 is pretty different from its original version! Mostly because there's a lot more to it. Initially, all pathways ended up attempting to break into Vengeance's safehouse. Now, the chapter begins one of three ways:

1. The original version, with Button and gang on route to the safehouse. This version plays out if Button accepts Shard's help and learns where/how Nick is being kept. There are also multiple new options on how to get into the house, including using Glitch's drone and calling Sally's dad for ideas. This route also includes shiny new blueprints of the house (please let me know if the images don't show up for you).
2. Should Button NOT accept Shard's help, there's no heist to enter the safehouse. Instead, half the chapter is spent interrogating either Caleb or Isaiah (depending on your decisions in earlier chapters).
3. A third variation plays out should Button initially accept Shard's assistance only to reject it (either by giving up or attempting to turn the tables) midway through their weird-psychic-brainmerge-thingy. While this branch ultimately connects to Path #2 (the interrogation scenes), it includes additional variations of the Chapter 14 scenes with Gray and Sally.

Regardless of which path you pursue, you always end up at the mansion (albeit with minor changes like Caleb being your creepy cheerleader over the com). The house investigation has been reorganized, however, so that your choices are more impactful and have payoff in future chapters.

Should you break into the house quickly (or with the assistance of Caleb/Isaiah, because they know the alarm code), you have more time and can find all the clues: it doesn't matter whether you examine Reese's bathroom or bedroom first. If you don't manage to turn the alarm off in under seven seconds, the information you gain depends upon order of investigation. Pick the bedroom, and you won't have time to find Reese's hair dye, but you will discover a clue which you can gain further insight . . . provided you pick an option that matches your stats OR an option which correlates with how Button passed the ASE back in Chapter 2 (Buttons that got into fights and the beard-disguise Button don't have this extra option, but they get other opportunities to shine in Chapter 16).

Perhaps the most important change is that you now have a choice whether or not to follow Kenzie down the dark passageway. Choose not to follow them to Crazy Town, and you can instead escape by yourself. (Warning: Glitch won't be happy should you take this second option.)

I'm still fixing the code for the second and third routes of Chapter 15, as the inclusion of Caleb/Isaiah has ripple effects for most endings. That being said, I wanted to at least release the expanded version of the heist this month. To play through this version of Chapter 15, accept Shard's help in the previous chapter and don't pass out.

It's also very possible that some Chapter 15 scenes may be a little wonky transition-wise—Path #1 alone is a 114-page document, so I've probably mislabeled at least one scene. If you discover a sentence that randomly breaks off mid-adjective, please let me know. I honestly have a love-hate relationship this chapter because there's so much variation (although my hope is that makes it fun to play!).

The rest of Chapter 15 should be ready for public consumption in a few days, but if you have time to play through the heist and provide feedback, I'd love to hear your opinions. Button's B&E can play out a LOT of ways, and I haven't yet been able to personally playtest the more obscure routes.

Semi-Interesting Factoids:

1. Innovative and Insightful Buttons have multiple advantages during the heist (scores usually need to be above 50), whereas Interpersonal Buttons shine during the interrogation scenes with Isaiah/Caleb.
2. The "Genius" option for passing the ASE ("I'm smart, pure and simple.") lets you bypass the most Innovative/Insightful/Interpersonal stat checks in Chapter 15.
3. Interpersonal Buttons still have some bonuses in Path #1, such as the ability to call Sally's dads without needing to pass a high relationship check with Sally.
4. Only female mosquitos bite.
5. Insightful Buttons should try the new IC-U2 options. Ignore Glitch's protestations—you won't take *too* bad of an affection loss.

To play through this version of Chapter 15, accept Shard's help in the previous chapter and don't pass out:

<https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/chapter-15-update-part-1/mygame/>

[March Live Q&A: Friday, March 31st](#)

[Mar 30, 2023](#)

This month's Live Q&A will be tomorrow **(Friday, March 31st) at 8pm PST.**

I'll be uploading the rest of Chapter 15 as a file for you guys early as well (after I land back in Chicago tomorrow morning). It's not yet fully playable (I'm pretty sure that Caleb borked the coding, because Caleb ruins everything), but you'll at least be able to read about Button menacingly cracking their knuckles . . . or jokes, in the case of Humorous MCs.

Also (and maybe I'm just super biased/have trash taste): Rosy is unnervingly sexy when acting evil.

[MB Saucy Side: River in Egypt \(Featuring Sally\)](#)

[Mar 31, 2023](#)

Sally Alavidze was not in love.

Occasionally, maybe, she stared at you in your bathing suit for a slightly longer duration than what might strictly be platonic. So what? You were hot.

The fact that Sally had only found five people “hot” in her entire life was irrelevant.

Sometimes, perhaps, she developed a bitter taste in her mouth when you laughed at one of Grayson’s dumb jokes. It wasn’t possessiveness—she was simply disgusted by Gray’s expression of smug self-satisfaction. Could his ego get any bigger?

The fact that Sally had, up until this trip to Hawaii, considered Grayson Black to be among the best humanity had to offer (“obnoxiously humble,” she had once called him) was also irrelevant.

Also irrelevant: Sally’s constantly accelerated heartbeat, her inability to focus whenever you weren’t in the room due to wondering if you were laughing at another one of Grayson Black’s atrocious jokes, and that her fingers still tingled from you having casually grabbed her hand half an hour ago while you both were sunbathing by the vortex pool.

No, Sally Alavidze was definitely not in love.

(Denial was a different story.)

Make no mistake: Sally knew that she *loved* you. Thoroughly and eternally, until death did you two part. But being in love with you? Romance risked the other, safer love that had developed over the course of the last decade. Your relationship was, Sally deemed, the Platonic Ideal of Friendship, perfect in its form and unmarred by confused confessions.

If, secretly, she intermittently became preoccupied wondering how your lips might taste . . . well, that was Sally's personal business and it wasn't as if she could control the direction of her daydreams. (She was an artist! Daydreaming was a habit and meant nothing!) If she had, accidentally, found herself sketching the outline of your form on her notepad instead of the local flora like she intended, it wasn't because she'd been staring longingly at your back (as you'd once again laughed at Gray's story about the first time he'd tried surfing, which wasn't at all amusing even if the thought of Gray potentially drowning filled Sally with grim satisfaction).

Sally's pencil had been compelled by affection—*amicable, non-sexual affection*—to trace out the curve of your neck and lines of your chest. Her fascination with your body was nothing more than an artist's appreciation of a finely shaped model. Nothing more.

(Really, what the hell was so hilarious? "Funny" had never been one of Gray's main personality traits.)

Sally Alavidze was definitely not in love with you.

If placed under oath, her testimony would vehemently denied having ever wondered what it would be like to wrap herself around you like an octopus climbing a rock. No, Your Honor, Sally would never fantasize about repurposing the treehouse in her backyard, nor had she ever contemplated the logistics of intimacy beneath a roof only four feet high. Lying down would be required, she supposed. Not that she had thought about it, except in self-denial that she had thought about it.

Everything was changing so quickly. That's why she felt confused. Next year, you and her would be enrolled at Aeon. You would both be *employed*—albeit as student trainees, but the concept still felt uncomfortably adult. Taxes would be required.

And what would come next? You'd meet someone, someone great and way better than Grayson Black (who was smiling a little *too* brightly at you right now, if you asked Sally's opinion), and Sally would become a Dreaded Third Wheel.

Aha! There was the epiphany. Sally wasn't in love with you—that would jeopardize the status quo. She was just afraid. Afraid of things evolving, of your relationship becoming less important as you both got older and developed new connections.

Sally glanced at you from beneath her lashes.

Fear, not desire. That was the reason she couldn't get you out of her mind lately, the reason for sleepless nights and sweaty tossing and dreams that had no right to be so sweetly intoxicating that she resented their end.

Sally Alavidze certainly, absolutely, unquestionably, and categorically did *not* desire you. Kissing you would be like . . .

Sally let out a small gasp at the . . . the ludicrousness of such an image. You and her, alone, oblivious to everything but each other. Lips devouring, nuzzling, tasting, probing, needing more and more until . . .

"You alright, Sally?"

Sally looked up to find you gazing over at her with concern. She forced a smile.

"Peachy as pie," she said.

It was true. It *had* to be true, because Sally Alavidze cherished you too deeply to ever do something as foolish as fall in love.

[MB Short Story: No Take Backs](#)

[Apr 8, 2023](#)

"I comprehend that your house is flooded," Kim said. "But Wiseman . . . why are you *here*?"

His lips were compressed a little tighter than usual—a clear sign of discomfort in the man's stoic façade, if one knew to look for it. I decided to remain deliberately oblivious.

"Well, it's a long story, Rosy." I smiled with forced cheer, covertly wedging my suitcase into the threshold in case Kim decided to slam the door in my face.

"Summarize," Kim ordered.

The man had a right to be suspicious. I'd shown up at his apartment unannounced, and it wasn't as if we were the best of friends. Kim and I barely even qualified as frenemies. Still, his hostility made me bristle.

"It's not as if crashing at your place was my first choice," I said. "Gray's condo is undergoing renovations while he's visiting his family in London."

"You have no other friends?" Kim asked, the door inching slowly closed.

"I have plenty of friends!" I protested. "Friends out the wazoo."

Kim arched a skeptical eyebrow. It made him look annoyingly cool, the bastard. I'd never been able to master the art of the lone brow.

"I have friends," I repeated, internally wincing at the faint note of desperation that entered my voice.

"Then go stay with them." Kim attempted to fully shut the door only to be thwarted by my suitcase. I grinned smugly . . . but my smile quickly faded as I contemplated how to react.

I did have plenty of friends, provided prior hookups counted as friends. But staying with an ex, however casual our past relationship, meant having a version of *the conversation*, and I hated having *the conversation* even more than I hated Kim's company. Despite what the tabloids liked to claim, I hadn't been the one to end most of my serious(ish) relationships. Usually, the less-than-grand finale came in the form of "you're clearly too busy right now to maintain our relationship" followed by a gentle ghosting.

A few had reached back out over the years to see if my circumstances had changed: it hadn't, nor was I interested in rekindling a relationship with someone who wouldn't—or couldn't—understand my priorities.

I was still close with my bandmates from high school, but they had all married and moved to the suburbs—too far away to accommodate my daily commute to Aeon (plus, they all had toddlers and I valued my beauty sleep). Staying over at Salome's with Button would've felt awkward for nebulous reasons that I didn't want to ponder; being around Salome in general had begun feeling awkward this last year. When had I gone from thinking about her as "pretty annoying" to simply "pretty"? That was another conversation which I intended to avoid, even in the form of a monologue with myself.

Which left Kim.

"My friends are either out of town or just had babies," I said. *Or I used to sleep with them and despise emotional awkwardness.* "You can't expect me to impose on new parents."

"Check into a hotel."

"I tried." A financial conference downtown which meant the select few hotels which I trusted not to leak my location to the paparazzi were currently at full capacity with middle-aged Warren Buffet fanboys and twenty-something crypto bros from Wisconsin. Sure, I could've rented a room at a Holiday Inn, but that would mean having to wade through fans every day on my way to work. My neighborhood was gated; anyone could rent a room at a hotel.

Whatever Kim saw on my face—pathetic desperation, most likely—it made him heave an annoyed sigh. "How long until your place is habitable again?"

"Renovators say it should mostly be dried out three days," I replied. "I'll still have to tear out the floorboards and replace the drywall around where the pipe burst, but at least I won't need to wade through three inches of water to get to the stairwell."

Kim sighed again and opened the door wide enough for me to slide in my suitcase.

"Three days, Nick," he said. "Two nights. You leave on Monday."

I shouldered my way into the foyer before he could change his mind. "I'll be the ideal houseguest," I said. "You won't even notice I'm here."

Kim sighed for what must've been the eight-hundredth time. "Spare bedroom is down the hall to your left; clean towels are underneath the sink. I leave for work at 6:30 sharp, and I'm not giving you a spare key."

"Your hospitality knows no bounds," I snarked.

Kim reopened the door, motioning me back to the hallway if I had a problem with his terms. This time, I was the one to sigh.

"I'll be ready to leave by 6:20," I said.

* * * *

Kim's three-bedroom apartment was much like the man himself: devoid of personality and empty inside. The furnishings were sparse and grey, and the whole place screamed "temporary living" despite Kim having lived in Chicago for the better part of four years. It was almost enough to confirm my theory that Kim was an android but for a few distinctly human details such as muted-tone silk carpets in every room and an espresso machine with an integrated burr grinder that was (I begrudgingly admitted, if only to myself) even nicer than my own. Androids didn't need caffeine to operate.

I was a naturally early riser, so the only difficulty I faced when meeting Kim's morning departure deadline was overcoming my desire to annoy him by being late. In the end, my desire not to be homeless trumped the urge to agitate him, and I met him at the front door at 6:22.

"You said that you'd be ready to leave by 6:20," Kim snarled.

I arched both eyebrows at him (I'd practiced in the mirror last night to only raise the one before giving up after thirty seconds).

"I've been up since 5am," I replied coolly. "Your door was still closed at 6:15, so I figured that you forgot to set your alarm."

Kim's glower intensified over the rim of his thermos as he took another long drag of coffee. I resisted the urge to cackle maniacally—there was something utterly delightful about the fact that Ambrose Kim was clearly not a morning person. Maybe it was petty, but it made me feel superior.

"You usually take the subway to work, right?" I asked.

Kim grunted.

"I can drive you," I offered. "Since we're heading to the same place." Damn, I deserved a medal for being a good human being.

Kim briefly looked tempted to refuse, but finally nodded. Apparently even my company was preferable to the crush of public transportation.

Being a civil human being of modest charm, I attempted to make light conversation on our drive to work. Being an uppity asshole of zero people skills, Kim responded to my every overture with pained silence.

Grayson's constant instances were wrong: there was no redeeming quality about Ambrose Kim.

* * * *

"He let you stay over," Gray pointed out during our lunchbreak (well, his dinnertime) phone call.

"Well, yeah," I conceded, "but—"

"No buts, Nick," Gray sighed. "Ambrose could've made you get a hotel room."

I snickered. "No butts? That must make life difficult."

"Just play nice." Gray ignored my joke, but I could hear a smile in his voice. He wasn't as mature as he pretended. "Who knows? Maybe you two will discover common ground."

"Pretty sure that we'd rather bury each other *under* the ground," I said. "But I'll try."

"That's all I ask," Gray said, sounding like an approving dad during his kid's soccer game. "Now, what exactly happened to your place? Your text was somewhat cryptic—I doubt that any mermaids have moved in."

"The mermaids might have been wishful thinking," I conceded. "I always did have a thing for Ariel."

Gray chuckled. "You and redheads."

Nope. Wasn't about to take *that* bait.

"A pipe burst downstairs," I said. "Flooded the living room and hallway, but at least my kitchen is untouched."

"You know what else has been untouched?" Gray asked. "You, ever since things ended with Sohvi."

"Things?" I scoffed. "It was a thing at the most. A very brief thing. And I get touched plenty."

"Doesn't count if it's your own hand," Gray retorted.

"You know, I should really inform the world what an asshole you can be," I said dryly. "Some might even consider it my civic duty, given the pedestal that the public puts you on. You need to be toppled."

"I'm simply concerned for my dearest friend's wellbeing," Gray said, "and think it's about time he stop wallowing in denial and go after what he obviously—"

"How's your mom?" I interrupted.

"She's better at redirecting the topic than you are," Gray said. "Honestly, I'm pretty sure that my father and I would've murdered each other by the second day of my visit had my mother not acted as a restraining force."

My phone buzzed. I groaned as I looked down at the text message.

"Speaking of wanting to murder someone," I said, "Kim just texted. Apparently, he needs to borrow my car."

* * * *

Kim's stubborn refusal to disclose *why* he needed to borrow my Land Rover meant that no way in hell was I letting him go alone. Which is why I was currently driving, in awkward silence, to Johans Prep High School.

We stopped at a red light, and I glanced over at Kim in the passenger seat.

"Sooooooooooooo," I said, drawing out the syllable until a flicker of annoyance crossed his features. "You have a kid?"

"Excuse me?" Kim sputtered—actually sputtered!—in shock.

"A kid," I said, refocusing back on the road so he didn't notice my amused smirk. "Offspring. Progeny. Fruit of thy loins. The result of—"

"I understood the question, Wiseman," Kim growled. "I failed to comprehend why you would ask it."

I gestured to the gps with one hand, keeping the other on the wheel. "We're going to a high school for reasons you refuse to disclose. What else am I supposed to think?" I gasped theatrically. "Is it a secret love child?"

The corners of Kim's mouth tightened. "Pull in here," he ordered, motioning to an upcoming school sign on the right. "And no, I do not have a *secret love child*."

"Ah," I said, trying not to chuckle. "Probably a good thing if we're being honest. Some people shouldn't procreate."

I timed my sarcastic sigh so that it synchronized perfectly with his exasperated exhale. I didn't have had a clue as to why we were headed to a high school, but in some ways Kim remained eternally predictable.

Whatever I had expected to happen at the high school, it wasn't that a sixteen-year-old boy would actually look *relieved* when Kim stepped out of my SUV. Kim provoked many emotions in others (fear, agitation, rage) but relief? What was wrong with this kid?

"Mr. K!" he cried out, lurching upright from where he'd been leaning against the hood of a beat-up Honda Civic. "Thank you so much for coming! I'm so sorry about your car and that I bothered you at work—I don't know why it's not starting, but I need to pick Junie up from school, and I can't call Mom because she's already been absent from work that day last week when I was puking my guts out, and her boss threatened to fire her if she missed any more days, and I don't want to be responsible for her losing—"

"Breathe," Kim ordered.

The kid sucked in a deep breath, only to choke on it when his gaze landed on me.

"Is that *Justice*?" he squeaked. "Mr. K, I didn't know that you worked with The Ideals! That's so cool!" He wiped his sweaty hand on his cargo pants and thrust it in my direction. "Jesse Paxton, sir. It's an honor to meet you."

I shook the kid's hand and gave him a broad smile. "Honor is all mine, Jesse," I said. "Any, uh, friend of Mr. K is a friend of mine."

I could almost hear Kim's teeth grinding together.

"So, how do you know Mr. K?" I asked, delighting in the way Kim's eyes narrowed at my usage of the nickname. It was clear that the two weren't related: Jesse looked like a gangly leprechaun and was paler than Button's friend, Kent. The kid was also a good several inches taller than Kim, almost able to look me in the eye.

Jesse opened his mouth to reply, gazing at Kim with something disturbingly akin to hero worship.

"Jesse is my neighbor," Kim interjected smoothly before the kid could speak. "He helps me cut back on parking costs by taking my car to school for the day, since my commute so close." His dark eyes glared at me in warning.

Jesse shook his head, a lock of strawberry blonde hair flopping over his eyes. "That's just Mr. K's excuse," he said bluntly. "My mom works late hours, and the bus won't drop me and Junie off at my grandma's after school. She lives in the suburbs and can't drive anymore, so Mr. K lets me use his car during the week."

"Who's Junie?" I asked.

"My little sister," Jesse said. "She's seven. I don't know what we'd do without Mr. K lending me his car."

"Like I said," Kim replied without a trace of emotion, "you're doing me a favor since your school provides free parking."

Jesse rolled his eyes, but fondly. "Sure, Mr. K." His face fell in a frown. "I really don't know why the car broke down, though! There weren't any warning lights on it when I drove to school, but it just won't start!"

"Did you call Triple-A like I told you?" Kim asked.

Jesse nodded.

"Then someone will be here to tow the car," Kim said. "When does Junie get out of school?"

"In twenty minutes," Jesse replied.

Kim looked at me. His expression wasn't pleading, exactly. Kim had too much pride to ever beg, but he also lacked the imperious air with which he had demanded my car. At least now I understood *why* he'd needed my vehicle in the first place:

To pick up a first grader.

Who was this man and what had he done with Ambrose Kim?

"It's my lucky day," I said cheerily, opening the car's backdoor for Jesse to climb in. "I always wanted to be a school bus driver."

* * * *

I called Gray back that evening, not much caring that it was 2am in London. Gray wouldn't care that I woke him up, either, once he learned what I had to say, although his initial reaction was to cuss me out and demand that I become acquainted with human decency and "not wake a bloke up in the middle of his slumber." I swear, he became more painfully British every second he was back home.

"You were right," I admitted.

Gray's crankiness instantly fled. "Repeat that," he demanded, "so I can get it on recording." He paused warily. "Is this a trick?"

"So little faith in me," I chided. "I'm man enough to admit when my preconceptions may not be one-hundred percent accurate."

"Is this about hockey?" Gray asked. "I *told* you it was the superior sport to football."

"It isn't, and it isn't," I replied. "It's about Kim."

"Go on."

“He may, possibly, have one or two redeeming qualities.”

A sharp knock rapped on the wall of the bedroom I was staying in.

“Shut up, Wiseman, or I’m kicking you out,” Kim shouted through the wall. “I’m working--fixing paperwork that *you* filled out incorrectly.”

I groaned. “You know what, Gray? I take it back. There is nothing good about Ambrose Asshole Kim.”

[MB Saucy Side: Unredeemable \(Featuring Andy\).](#)

[Apr 22, 2023](#)

Andy’s lips connect with yours, his need slamming you against the wall with enough force to shudder the still-open front door. He doesn’t bother with formalities or small talk; he knows (or thinks he knows) why you insisted on meeting him at an off-the-grid motel over two-hundred miles outside Chicago’s city limits, and it wasn’t for something so civilized as exchanging pleasantries and observations about the rainy weather.

His tongue muffles your gasp—tomorrow, your back will bear bruised proof of today’s encounter. With luck, you’ll be able to hide the evidence beneath your shirt.

Andy, however, doesn’t oblige your hopes. When has he ever been obliging? His mouth abandons yours, lips tasting downwards to the small hollow at the side of your neck, sucking and nipping with callous disregard towards your intentions to pretend that this never happened. He won’t *allow* you to forget this bad decision, his marks proving your compromised integrity for all to see.

It’s as exhilarating as it is humiliating.

Seducing him had always been part of the plan, but you didn’t expect to enjoy it. No, you’re not enjoying this. Enjoyment is innocent and pure, the tingle of delight that comes from having lunch with friends or cuddling with a crush. Whatever it is you feel towards Andy, it’s too laden with guilt and recrimination to be labeled something as tepid as “enjoyment.” The glide of his hands moving beneath your shirt too rough and hurried, the way he kisses you too angry and selfish. Andy’s touch isn’t enjoyable; it’s intoxicating.

Addictive.

Your fingers thread helplessly through his thick, dark hair, yet you’re unwilling to pull him off. The heat of his lips feels too good, too sinful, against your skin. A little painful, perhaps—Andy doesn’t care enough

to be gentle—but that’s part of the illicit pleasure. Your absolute need for each other is twisted and black and all-consuming to the point of being a dark cliché, but at least Andy’s scowl indicates that he’s as enraged by the connection as you.

“Be gentle,” you beg.

Andy bites down. Not hard enough to draw blood, but enough to hurt and force a startled cry from your lips. He withdraws a few inches, examines the faint teeth marks imprinted above your collarbone, and smirks.

Andrew Guerra is, you acknowledge as he finally kicks close the front door, a terrible human being.

He’s also hot as hell.

Perhaps it’s the asymmetry of his face. Andy may have escaped being arrested, but he’s undeniably *arresting*. You stare back into his hungry gaze, his pupils dilated so as to render his brown eyes almost black. None of Andy’s features are soft or apologetic. In a rare case where the exterior reflects inner character, he’s composed harsh lines and sharp, jagged angles. His heavy dark brows are smugly opinionated, the left arching naturally higher than his right, and his lips curve in a perpetual smirk as if he’s stolen a secret never meant to be shared.

Or perhaps Andy is sexy simply because he shouldn’t be. Andy is a criminal prone to violent outbursts and petty cruelty, and his past threats upon your life have ranged from slyly implied to brutally explicit. He’s the bigoted sycophant of a terrorist leader, a man who gleans mean satisfaction from dominating others while simultaneously being too cowardly to seize control over Vengeance for himself.

Or perhaps he retains a semblance of soul and was thus unwilling to be the one making those final bloody calls?

Unlikely.

No, there is nothing redeemable in Andy’s nature.

The wrongness of your mutual craving, therefore, presents what might be termed a “moral dilemma” (although Sally would likely claim that the existence of any internal struggle to be an indicator that you should seek further therapy). You must be insane to whimper so plaintively as he grabs you by the jaw. Sick, to be unable to resist grinding against the leg he forces between your own.

You must be broken to want him to break you.

Andy seizes your wrists, pinning them to the wall above your head. “Just once, to get you the fuck out of my system,” he growls. “Then we forget each other, agreed?”

You nod silently, confused by your inability to discern the difference between your fear and your arousal—the two emotions are irrevocably entangled, both peaking yet higher as Andy snarls and tightens his

grip on your wrists.

“Agreed?” he repeats.

“Agreed,” you whisper, momentarily forgetting that it’s all a lie.

Your soft compliance shatters Andy’s last vestige of self-restraint. His body presses against yours, insistent and unyielding, forcing you to feel all of his desire and hatred. You’re torn between pride and revulsion at being the reason behind such desperation. Does he loathe how much he craves your touch? In addition to need, his every groan is laced with pain and anger. He despises you, he needs you, he despises himself for needing you. In that, at least, you two claim common ground.

“I hate you,” Andy swears between claiming to your lips. “Reese is in jail because of you. Everything is ruined.” He wraps a hand around your throat, almost tight enough to cut off your air, and glares into your eyes. “Fucking . . . hate . . . you.”

His next kiss is savage and as bitter as his words.

You put your hands on his shoulders and press, needing space to think, to *stop*. To your surprise, Andy actually concedes and takes a step back, his gaze still furious but also quizzical, a hint—just a hint—of vulnerability lurking beneath the rage and desire.

“Why did you even call me here?” he demands, voice hoarse. “What do you—”

The door slams open, cutting off his words. Kent barges into the motel room, his hands immediately grabbing Andy’s arms and wrestling him onto the bed. Gray enters after, moving towards you with a concerned expression once he’s confirmed that Kent has successfully handcuffed Andy.

“This was a fucking trap?” Andy screams, thrashing wildly beneath Kent. “You’re fucked, Wiseman! I will ruin you, you—”

His stream of profanities and insults fades as Kent wrestles him out the door and into the waiting transport van.

“Are you okay?” Gray asks. “We were waiting for your signal, but Sally . . .” His cheeks redden, and he avoids meeting your gaze. “She said we should probably enter before, uh, you got in trouble.”

“I had everything under control,” you lie, trying to project cool competence and not do anything to hint at the fact that Andy just left you a quivering mess. “Everything went perfectly according to plan. Andrew Guerra can now stand trial for his crimes, and I . . .”

“Can finally put it all behind you?” Gray suggests gently.

You laugh. “And I can avoid my brother until this is all a distant memory.”

[MB Saucy Side: Unredeemable \(Featuring Liz\)](#)

[Apr 22, 2023](#)

Liz's lips connect with yours, her need slamming you against the wall with enough force to shudder the still-open front door. She doesn't bother with formalities or small talk; she knows (or thinks she knows) why you insisted on meeting her at an off-the-grid motel over two-hundred miles outside Chicago's city limits, and it wasn't for something so civilized as exchanging pleasantries and observations about the rainy weather.

Her tongue muffles your gasp—tomorrow, your back will bear bruised proof of today's encounter. With luck, you'll be able to hide the evidence beneath your shirt.

Liz, however, doesn't oblige your hopes. When has she ever been obliging? Her mouth abandons yours, lips tasting downwards to the small hollow at the side of your neck, sucking and nipping with callous disregard towards your intentions to pretend that this never happened. She won't *allow* you to forget this bad decision, her marks proving your compromised integrity for all to see.

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Addictive.

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Elizabeth Guerra is, you acknowledge as she finally kicks close the front door, a terrible human being.

She's also hot as hell.

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Her stream of profanities and insults fades as Kenna wrestles her out the door and into the waiting transport van.

"Are you okay?" Gray asks. "We were waiting for your signal, but Sally . . ." His cheeks redden, and he avoids meeting your gaze. "She said we should probably enter before, uh, you got in trouble."

"I had everything under control," you lie, trying to project cool competence and not do anything that hints at the fact that Liz just left you a quivering mess. "Everything went perfectly according to plan. Elizabeth Guerra can now stand trial for her crimes, and I . . ."

"Can finally put it all behind you?" Gray suggests gently.

You laugh. "And I can avoid my brother until this is all a distant memory."

[April Live Q&A](#)

[Apr 29, 2023](#)

This month's live Q&A will be held at **4pm PST tomorrow (Sunday, April 30th)**.

I've reserved a study room at the library since my internet is currently out (my condo building is in the process of changing providers, and cell data doesn't really cut it), but it's next to the piano practice room so there may or may not be musical accompaniment by a 12-year-old practicing the main refrain to Fur Elise over and over and over again.

Why the oddly specific example? Because that's what happened last time I booked one of the "noise proof" study rooms. Kid was noticeably better by the twenty minute mark, but then got overbold with the ad-libbing. (One does not mess with Beethoven.)

[Oh No Not Another Project](#)

[May 29, 2023](#)

Note: As I wrap up *Mind Blind*'s endings (more on that next update post, so stay tuned!), I've realized that there are several aspects of the lore/world that I want to delve into deeper. Not unanswered questions, exactly, because everything is pretty definitively answered in game (although maybe not in all endings), but certain elements of the story deserve elaboration.

So, *Mind Blind* is getting a sequel!

Kind of.

Make no mistake: ***Mind Blind* itself remains a standalone game.** It's Button's story, from beginning to end. Main characters in *Mind Blind* will not be main characters in *Oak Grove* (sidebar: the title isn't actually Oak Grove, but my planned title has spoilers). They may have cameos, though. "*Oak Grove*" will also be a much shorter project than *Mind Blind* that I plan to work on at the same time as *Delivery for the Damned*. Probably only 200,000 words versus over a million. Like *Mind Blind*, this "sequel" will use choicescript with Hosted Games. And since *Delivery* will be written in Twine, this will allow me to continue writing fun stuff while simultaneously learning a second coding language.

Anyway, I desperately needed to take break from fixing *Mind Blind*'s umpteenth error code, so . . . well, stuff got written. A lot of stuff, if I'm being honest. I apologize for letting myself become distracted

Still, I decided to share a teensy peak. A little prematurely, probably, but I'm excited. Hopefully, this will also assuage any concerns you guys might have after reading the first endings if it feels like some of Unity's . . . more questionable decisions are left unaddressed. (Realistically, some of those decisions don't have much to do with Button, which is why they aren't fully explored in *Mind Blind*. But at the same time, they're morally gray in the most delicious way and I want to dig deeper.)

(Second sidebar: *Mind Blind* major update is coming within next few days. There's been a few real-world disruptions such having my upstairs neighbor's water heater flood my condo and the ever-endless subsequent construction that making it *really* hard to work, but at least one ending will be released in the month of May to celebrate *Mind Blind*'s Oh-Shit-I've-Been-Writing-This-For-Three-Years Anniversary.)

(Third sidebar, because my adhd meds have worn off and thus I can't stay on a single topic: I hope you guys find the premise of Oak Grove intriguing. Funnily enough, it uses a lot of my original plans for *Mind Blind* back when *Mind Blind* was still a novel.)

* * * *

Oak Grove Academy Incident, File 190

Testimony: Teagan Sawyer

You want me to talk about Oak Grove? Well, for starters, it's a dumbass name. Only official paperwork calls it Oak Grove Academy. Oaks aren't native to the Pacific Northwest, and we aren't located anywhere near a grove, but Oak Grove is the third most common name for schools in the United States and so that's what they picked; anyone who wanted to learn more would have to filter their search engine results through three-hundred and sixty-two other Oak Groves. Like naming someone in witness protection "John Smith." I feel like a history teacher. Is this really necessary?

Everything that I know? I know a hell of a lot, probably more than I'm supposed to. Definitely more than you'd be comfortable with me sharing, but it's not like I ever have the option to remain ignorant. But fine. If you want to know everything, I'll tell you everything.

The school was originally called Union Academy (Union being the sixth most common name for schools) during the first two years of its founding, but then the board worried that "Union" was too similar to "Unity" and they'd changed the name. So, the academy has been Oak Grove for the last thirty-six years, a "therapeutic boarding school" for "troubled youth" that's near neither oaks nor a grove and which no one ever hears about unless their child is "cordially invited."

Cordial or not, it isn't an invitation that can be turned down.

Most students just call it "The Academy" as if it's the only one existence or at least the only school of import and thus deserving the definite article. They have a point. Most my classmates are raging narcissists who believe themselves to be center of the universe (because that's what inevitably happens when kids grew up being told that they were not only special but the *most* special), but Oak Grove Academy is probably more essential than any other school out there. Most schools don't have a student populace capable (and, honestly? likely) of accidental murder; herding us all together like contaminated cattle supposedly keeps the rest of the world safe. The teachers don't phrase it that way, of course. No, their go-to speech is all about our "unique calling" and "finding our place" within an "ever-changing paradigm."

Shiloh and I always called Oak Grove the Island of Misfit Toys and had been doing so for so long that I don't remember who originally came up with the nickname. It might've been Maggie back before she'd started setting herself on fire and ended up . . . well, none of us really know where Maggie ended up. Same place as all the other kids who can't control their abilities. Shiloh thinks there's a pile of bodies somewhere, or that the rejects are all drowned in the Pacific, but Shiloh also believes those faux historical documentaries claiming that aliens built the pyramids.

Calling Oak Grove "The Island of Misfit Toys" worked for several reasons. Most obviously because we actually *were* on an island—our own idyllic Alcatraz just north of San Juan, to be exact, on a grassy seven square miles inhabited only by students and faculty. Shaw Island had been a rural community of about two hundred back in the day, before Unity had bought out all the farmers. Gotta wonder if they had more say in leaving Shaw Island than we did in coming there. Anyway, Unity always helped families relocate to the neighboring islands after their kids were "accepted" in Oak Grove. If they wanted to relocate, that is; most didn't. Those students, the ones with parents who still gave a damn, were allowed to take the ferry home on weekends and holidays, provided they weren't deemed to be flight risks.

Shiloh and I don't have families nearby. Shiloh never had a family to begin with, and mine had disowned me after discovering that I was not only a Ment but that I was a *freaky* Ment. All of us at Oak Grove are the freaky kind of Ment, either because our psychic agility tests off the charts or because it manifests in some weirdly wonderful way that hasn't been previously recorded like Shiloh's biokinesis. Our yearly talent show puts all other schools to shame, I swear . . . even if the auditorium size is overoptimistic for the number of parents that ever bothered to attend. Most students' families are like mine: too terrified of their own offspring to visit.

So yeah. Oak Grove is both haven and prison, with student inmates/refugees who attend until the day we inevitably joined Unity. Not that we strictly *have* to join Unity once we graduate and prove ourselves to be in full control of our abilities. Joining Unity is just . . . very strongly encouraged, since the alternative is being placed in Unity's version of witness protection and banned from ever using our powers in public.

Obviously, most Oak Grove graduates sign up to be superheroes.

What are my plans? Look, you're not my guidance counselor. Respectfully (and I say that sarcastically, just in case it went over your head), my future career plans are none of your damn business.

Our jailors (that is to say, the teachers) are all Ments as well. The younger ones are all former Oak Grove graduates—that's another option available to us, if we don't want to fight crime or fade into controlled obscurity. Theoretically, the teachers understand what the students were going through, but that doesn't negate the fact that they chose to be there and we hadn't. Captivity is still captivity, you know? Even if the zoo is run by fellow monkeys.

Look, can I get some water? Boredom makes me thirsty.

* * * *

Oak Grove Academy Incident, Student File 190

Testimony: Shiloh Sawyer

I'm not saying anything without a lawyer present. A recognizable lawyer! Not one of your goons in disguise. I want . . . I want that guy from late night TV. Larry Watson! Yeah, you heard me. I want that bald ambulance chaser dude with the gold front tooth.

At least I know he's real.

Until then, my lips are zipped.

[MB Short Story: Blue Chicken Life \(Ferro and Kent Version\)](#)

[May 31, 2023](#)

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!"

Glitch's wail echoes from the living room, his despair resonating off half-painted walls and ricocheting down the empty hallway to greet you at the front door. With an exasperated-but-loving sigh, you take off your shoes so as not to scuff the new floorboards and head in the direction of your boyfriend's cry. No doubt he heard you enter, which explains the increasing volume of his overdramatic sobs. The unlidded paint bucket in the corner causes you to frown; from the looks of it, progress on the hallway walls hasn't progressed since you left for work this morning.

What have they been up to?

The living room is still unfurnished but for a mounted widescreen television, a docked game console, and two oversized beanbag chairs and their occupants. Glitch's controller is located on the opposite end of the room, no doubt flung dramatically upon the moment of his in-game death.

"Everything all right?" You nudge Glitch over and join him on the beanbag. It's a tight squeeze, but Glitch doesn't seem to mind given the way he immediately throws his arms around you and latches on.

"Nothing is right!" Glitch buries his head in your shoulder, muffling sobs that sound suspiciously like laughter. "Nothing shalt ever be all right ever again."

Uh-oh. Things must be rough if your boyfriend has already gone Ye Olde English.

You glance questioningly over at Kent, who shrugs. "We died."

Glitch glares at his friend with dry eyes. “Blasphemy!” he proclaims. “Slander! We perished not; the console did.”

That explains why there’s no “GAME OVER” on the black tv screen. You rub Glitch’s back soothingly. “There, there,” you say. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

Glitch straightens as if affronted while also leaning into your touch. “Do not placate me, O Dearest Dream of My Soul. I am a shattered, broken man.”

“Shattered and broken are redundant,” Kent points out.

Glitch ignores him. “Yonder relic was no mere console. ’Twas a cherished antique, the spoils of war which I won from an empowered warrior at great risk and peril.”

“Nick gave Ferro his old Switch,” Kent translates, “provided that Ferro stopped nagging him about saliva samples.”

“Your brother had been frustratingly uncooperative with my attempts to understand the effects of the chemical BRS on his body,” Glitch says. “He thought video games would distract me.”

“He was right,” Kent says.

Glitch groans and flops onto the floor like a downed soldier (or a melodramatic fish). “I admit it: Nick unearthed my weakness.”

You widen your eyes and try to look innocent. At this point, there probably isn’t much that Nick *doesn’t* know about Glitch—the consequence of Nick being able to read your mind. It’s one of the reasons that you suggested that you and Glitch move in together despite only having dated for three months.

“Still, we’ll search for a replacement tomorrow when we’re out furniture shopping,” you offer instead of confessing to the obvious. “Switch out the memory card, and then you two can get back to playing whatever it was that you were playing.”

Glitch rolls over onto his side and stares at you with a defeated expression. “My heart, you don’t understand,” he says. “The console died moments after I found our first prismatic shard.”

Kent nods solemnly.

“Now I have to wait another year to turn my children into doves,” Glitch whines.

If you have no clue what they’re talking about: go to Ending A

If you speak Farm Nerd: go to Ending B

Ending A

You blink. "What into what now?"

"My children," Glitch says slowly as if repetition will magically cause the statement to make sense. "I've been trying to turn them into doves since Spring."

"He regrets marrying Shane," Kent adds in non-explanation.

"I wanted blue chickens," Glitch bemoans, "but he made my house so ugly."

You suppress a smile, still clueless but rolling with it. "Here I thought this was *our* home now. Cheating on me already, Ferro?"

Glitch straightens from the floor, rising to a kneeling position and staring at you as if awaiting knighthood. You possess my heart and eternal devotion," he says, ignoring Kent's eyeroll. "But my love . . . have you never played *Stardew Valley*?"

"I have not," you confirm, forcing your tone to match Glitch's solemnity while stifling a smile. "It's a farming game, right?"

Glitch gasps and lays a hand over his heart. "A farming game?" he repeats. "*Stardew Valley* is no mere farming game. It's a classic which has held up over the decades a prime example of . . . of . . ." For once, Glitch's words fail him, confounded by your lack of knowledge over an agricultural life simulator.

"It's a chill game," Kent says. "Kinda boring, but chill."

Glitch emits a horrified squeak. "Kinda boring?"

"Most video games are boring." Kent shrugs, his expression one of indifference. "This one is relaxing, at least."

"I'm sure that *Stardew Valley* is great," you hastily interject before Glitch declares their friendship over and void.

Glitch's gaze swivels between you and Kent. "Betrayal all around me!" he declares, flinging out an arm like Romeo in his death throes.

"I said it was chill," Kent sighs. "Stop overreacting."

"BETRAYAL!" Glitch's arm swings in your direction, his finger coming to rest upon the tip of your nose. "Betrayal in the form of ignorance!" His arm swings again, this time pointing accusatorily at Kent. "And betrayal in the form of . . ." He hesitates, at a loss to summarize his discontent.

"Deception?" you suggest.

"Boredom?" Kent says.

"Betrayal in the form of bad taste," Glitch concludes.

Kent shrugs while you use your hand to cover your smile. "Life is so hard for you, babe," you tell Glitch, "being surrounded by such unenlightened souls."

"So tragic," Kent says without inflection.

Glitch stands and looks down his nose at where you're still seated in the beanbag. He gives a dignified sniff, the kind performed by British butlers in American movies when they're appalled by someone's plebian classlessness. "I'm calling my future brother-in-law to commiserate about how terrible you both are," he announces. "I'll properly educate you upon my return."

He sashays out of the room, head held high. Once he's out of sight, you and Kent look at each other, your accusations verbalized simultaneously:

"He's your best friend."

"You're dating him."

Ending B

"You're a monster," you flatly inform your boyfriend. "Only a monster would use the Dark Shrine of Selfishness."

"I made a mistake!" Glitch protests. "How was I supposed to know that Shane would ruin my house design?"

"So, you turn your children into birds because your relationship soured? *Monster*."

"The kids were an accidental click."

"Mon-ster."

Glitch clasps your hand between his own, cussing them close to his chin pleadingly. "Don't be cruel," he whines. "Isn't it bad enough that I lost my first prismatic shard?"

At the sound of an amused snort, both your heads pivot in Kent's direction. He's smirking. Kent isn't usually a smirker; the fact that he's doing so now doesn't bode well.

Glitch's eyes narrow. "Spit it out."

Kent shakes his head, smirk undiminished. "It's nothing."

"Bullshizzle," Glitch declares. "You have that *I'm-thinking-something-devious-and-internally-amused-by-it* look that you get. Don't keep us in suspense."

"It's just that Wiseman is being awfully calm about your affair," Kent murmurs.

"It wasn't an affair," Glitch retorts, "I simply wanted blue chickens." He glances over at you. "Sweetheart, Shane meant nothing to me."

"Also," Kent continues, his smirk deepening, "it sounds like you two should've discussed family planning before moving in together. Different values on how to raise children and all."

You expect Glitch to immediately snap out a comeback and are surprised when no response is forthcoming. Instead, he bashfully ducks his head and avoids looking at you.

"I—" Glitch starts. "That is, we don't plan. . . we never—"

Is your eloquent boyfriend actually *stuttering*?

"You two never discussed the future?" Kent teases relentlessly. "Surprising. Would've thought that was something to bring up before moving in together."

Glitch stands up abruptly. "Time for you to go," he announces. "Dogs need to be fed and whatnot."

Kent rises from his beanbag lazily, his smirk still firmly affixed. "Annie and Cass don't get out of their grooming appointment for another hour," he says, "but I can take a hint."

"Can you?" Glitch mutters under his breath.

"Yes," Kent replies. He puts out a hand, stopping Glitch from following him into the hallway. "I'll see myself out. You stay." His grey eyes twinkle with mirth as he gives you a small smile. "After all, you two have an important conversation to conduct."

Glitch groans. "Just *go* already."

Kent exits to the hallway, his soft laughter disappearing behind the condo's front door. Glitch takes his abandoned beanbag, positioning it so that he's seated directly across from you. His hand nervously rubs the back of his neck, and his smile is wobbly.

"Is Kent right?" Glitch asks. "Is this a conversation that we should've already had? Or need to have? Or am I overthinking things as usual because I know that I want to be with you no matter what but I also want to make sure that we're on the same page and—"

You lean forward and seal Glitch's mouth with yours, cutting him off mid-ramble.

"We have all the time in the world for those conversations," you whisper against his lips. "Right now, why don't you show me the new bedroom furniture?"

[May 31, 2023](#)

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Ending B

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[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions on . . . Marriage Candidates](#)

[May 31, 2023](#)

Author’s Disclaimer:

My friend recently got into Stardew Valley for the first time, so I’ve been bombarded with constant texts about the game for the past month, resulting in the theme for recent stories. Please be forewarned that

Nick and I disagree about most characters, and don't take it to heart if he trash-talks your favorite bachelor/bachelorette.

For those of you who haven't played Stardew Valley, it's essentially Harvest Moon Redux, a video game where you run around and water crops while (optionally) raising a little pixel family with the pixel person of your choice. To be honest, I was pretty shocked when Nick of all people ended up being a hardcore fan since he's more the shoot-aliens-with-guns-while-making-his-own-stupid-sound-effects type of gamer.

*But Nick has opinions, as always. One character from Stardew Valley in particular means a **lot** to him (I wonder if y'all will be able to guess which one).*

* * * *

Back when Button was younger, Mom would start up *Stardew Valley* on her old Nintendo Switch whenever she needed . . . a reprieve, I guess is the best way of framing it. The repetition of the game made Button pretty much zone out, which made their thoughts easier for Mom to handle. I'm not sure if Button ever caught on as to why Mom always steered them towards soothing farm sims, but I'm pretty sure that *Stardew Valley* preserved my mother's sanity (for as long as possible, at least).

Anyway, Button and I played the game in multiplayer a *lot* back in the day. Then we moved out, the Switch got temporarily lost, and I didn't touch the game again until I became a member of UCRT. Long story short: some of my early missions didn't go as smoothly as I would've liked, and Sohvi noticed that it was putting me on edge because Sohvi notices freaking everything. She must've talked to Gray about potential de-stressors for me because next thing I know, we're flying to Gibraltar to take down a kidnapping ring and she's booting up *Stardew Valley* in the UCRT jet.

It's become a ritual of sorts, a way of decompressing before plunging brainfirst into whatever hellhole scenario Unity was throwing us into. *Stardew Valley* isn't the only game we play enroute anymore, but it's still the heavy hitter that gets loaded for more serious missions.

Anyhow, journalists are always nagging me to talk about my love life, so here on record are my unvarnished opinions regarding video game marriage candidates. That's as personal as we're getting today.

* * *

Haley: Haley at reminds me of my high school girlfriend: artsy, confident, and with that rare quality that makes you feel like The Chosen One if she deigns to date you. She has probably the worst first impression in the game, but her character arc improves things. Unfortunately, I can't get past her severe youngest child syndrome (don't tell Button that I said that).

Conclusion: I'd like Haley more if she were a middle or only child.

* * *

Emily: I like Emily. She's sweet, responsible, and funky. Maybe a little too funky? I dunno. Sohvi says that I'm not spiritual enough to appreciate Emily's "luminescent spirit." But in my opinion, Harvey needs to explain to Emily how Pollard scores work. There's nothing mystical about psychic agility, and Emily is clearly a very oblivious Ment.

Conclusion: Emily would be fun to hit the dance clubs with.

* * *

Maru: I want to adopt Maru because she deserves a better older brother. She's adorably earnest and intellectually curious in a way that sort of reminds me of Button, especially when she accidentally electrocuted my farmer. It's like the game creator also encountered Button's fifth grade science fair experiment.

Conclusion: Maru deserves to get out of Stardew Valley and win that Nobel Prize.

* * *

Penny: Love her, adore her, would never marry her because she and my bro Sam clearly have a thing and homewrecking isn't how I roll. I kept shutting off the Switch whenever Gray tried to give her a flower bouquet, because I have Sam's back.

Conclusion: I'll be best man at Penny and Sam's wedding.

* * *

Abigail: Seems chill at first until you gift her a precious gemstone and she eats it. That's right: the woman eats rocks. I can't marry someone who eats rocks, and Sohvi has terrible taste since her farmer is married to this monster on our multiplayer file. Abigail hates fruit and vegetables yet will nibble on a quartz and declare it delicious. The girl is seriously messed up.

Conclusion: Not deserving of a homecooked meal since she'd just eat her engagement ring.

* * *

Leah: Artist, redhead, truffle connoisseur. The best bachelorette.

Conclusion: My farmer's wife in every save file.

* * *

Alex: There's nothing wrong with being a stereotypical jock. Hell, Gray accuses *me* of being a "stereotypical American jock" every time I drag him to a hockey game. But Alex is boring. Sohvi claims that the character has a good story, but the only reason I ever talked to Alex is when I visited his grandparents. I speed-clicked through most of his dialogue.

Conclusion: Evelyn and I will bond and bake amazing chocolate chip cookies together. Alex is allowed to be in the kitchen, provided he doesn't talk.

* * *

Harvey: The fact that Harvey is not the most popular bachelor confuses me. The man is independent, intelligent, caring, and appreciates freshly brewed coffee. What's not to adore other than his moustache? On second thought: screw that. Harvey is awesome and so is his 'stache. Haters can go get shaved because winners stan a man with tidily groomed facial hair. (Disclaimer that this does not mean I plan on personally growing a moustache. I had one for a month after losing a bet with my dad, and it made me look a corrupt vice cop from the 1970's.)

Conclusion: My farmer would marry Harvey if Leah didn't exist.

* * *

Elliot: Abandoning everything and everyone to pursue his own passions while surrounded by nature? Elliot is Grayson's escapist fantasy, which is probably why Gray married the guy after I cockblocked him from wooing Penny. Except Gray would probably pick up surfing if he lived on the beach instead of writing, and Gray would also have better digs than a dank cabin filled with cobwebs.

Conclusion: Gray is cooler than Elliot, but Elliot has better hair.

* * *

Shane: Reminds me of those burnt-out AMOs who retire after a bad mission. Dude needs to book an appointment with Sohvi.

Conclusion: Sorry, Shane, but if I wanted a fixer-upper, I'd buy the deed to Elliot's shack.

* * *

Sebastian: Certified Sad Boi (TM) who enjoys standing dejectedly in the rain and brags about rejecting the "rat race" while living rent-free in his mom's basement. Gray thinks that Sebastian is cool because Sebastian has a motorcycle, but Gray is a dumbass. Sebastian also claims to be Sam's best friend, which is a blatant lie because I'm Sam best friend. Go eat rocks with Abigail, Sebastian. The crab from *Little Mermaid* deserves a better namesake.

Conclusion: Sam and I don't need a synthesizer in our band.

* * *

Sam: The best character in-game and my farmer's virtual best friend forever. The only problem with Sam is that he hangs out with losers like Sebastian and Abigail instead of inviting me to join his band. Why won't you let me in the band, Sam? Is it because we both play guitar?

Unlike Mr. Woe-Is-Me who alienates his younger sister (Maru, I'm your big brother now), Sam does his damn best to protect his kid bro Vincent from life's harsher realities. My farmer has never married Sam because it would kinda feel like marrying my teenage self, but Sohvi said that in his marriage event, he becomes the composer for a kid show. How wholesome is that shit? Sam is living the dream.

Not that I'm jealous of Sam. I'm not. But it doesn't hurt to imagine "what if" sometimes, right?

Realistically speaking, as much as I might dream of having an endless supply of fresh produce from my own backyard, living in a small farm town like Stardew Valley would get tedious after the novelty wore off. Sam has his own struggles beyond the lack of a proper skate park.

Conclusion: It's fine if you're a disaster in the kitchen and drop eggs, Sam. I can cook for both you and Gray.

[Warning: Big League Spoilers \(MAJOR\)](#)

[Jun 5, 2023](#)

Vengeance Button embodies the worst/best bits of both Reese and Shard.

**label uchooseviolance*

The Vancouver bombing targeted newly graduated AMOs at a conference. All it achieved was aligning public sympathies with Unity: so many lives, all so young, lost too soon, etc.

**if (humor > 40) and (morbidity > 30)*

Boo-hoo, let's all shed a teardrop emoji.

The Ment who brainwashed you into bombing Aeon is the scum of the earth, but that doesn't mean there isn't a glimmer of inspiration to be found in their methodology. Misattribute blame for a crime, and you weaponize the authorities against an opponent. You were used to act as a tool in the hands of someone who wanted Unity to pursue Vengeance, but what if Reese had behaved similarly?

Had Reese really wanted to overturn the status quo, $\{the\}$ could've arranged the Vancouver bombing to appear as if it was committed by a Ment freedom fighter opposing Unity's agenda. The victims still would've won some sympathy points for Unity, that much is unavoidable whenever the faces of the deceased air on public television, but so long as a Ment was cast as the villain responsible for their deaths . . .

Well, that would've sparked whispers.

"Does Unity really have things under control?" Families would've wondered over dinner tables. "Ments must be dangerous if they're willing to attack their own kind."

Had Reese possessed the foresight to lay blame elsewhere instead of using Vengeance's banner to boast about the attack, {the} would have laid the groundwork for something much grander. Vengeance could've gradually ushered in an actual revolution instead of throwing small dinner parties in a silly attempt to gain two students as spies.

So many [i]would've[/i] and [i]could've[/i], all possible if only you had been in charge.

**fake_choice*

#Maybe I should be the one in charge of Vengeance.

**set Vroute true*

**goto MrDarkside*

#I shiver, disturbed by my own train of thought.

**goto tempting*

**label tempting*

You may have (many) issues with Unity and the way that Ments trample over the rights of others (particularly yours), but you're not an aspiring terrorist.

Although . . . if you were Vengeance's leader, maybe you could turn things around for the better. Advocate for limitations on Ment freedom with less murder, transforming the preexisting power structure into a legitimate advocacy for nonpowered human rights.

Perhaps Vengeance could even help fund and administer a permanent BRS. How much better would your life have been if your mother hadn't been a Ment? It's what she wants, even, the reason that she signed up for Mirrortech's BRS trial.

**if (Nover = false) and (Sally > 80)*

If all Ments were made normal, there'd be no need for Unity. Instead of risking his life fighting other Ments, Nick could attend culinary school or pursue music. Sally would no longer be haunted by visions she's powerless to change.

**elseif (Nover) and (Sally > 80)*

If all Ments were made normal, there'd be no need for Unity. Sally would no longer be haunted by visions she's powerless to change. You might even be able to have a relationship with Nick.

*else

If all Ments were made normal, there'd be no need for Unity. You might even be able to have a relationship with Nick.

It's tempting.

Take over Vengeance, and you can make the world a better place for everyone.

[Mind Blind Fairy Tale: Location of Latvia \(Featuring Spoilers\)](#)

[Jun 29, 2023](#)

Once upon a time, there lived a little boy who became very, very sad.

The little boy knew that he shouldn't feel sad. His family lived in—if not a palace—a house that would be considered palatial by the average apartment renter. Best of all, the little boy's mother and father loved him very, very much. His mother made the best cookies, and his father gave the best hugs. Although not royalty, his parents wielded a similar authority to a king and queen: when his parents spoke, people always listened.

The little boy also listened.

He couldn't *not* listen. All the time, even when (especially when) people weren't speaking. Thoughts were noisier than voices, and there were very few who possessed thoughts which the little boy couldn't hear. Worst, some people possessed thoughts that the little boy couldn't help *but* hear.

Most children in these circumstances would have perhaps avoided others, seeking refuge and quiet in solitude. But the little boy's nature lacked "lonesome" as a fundamental construction block; he possessed neither inclination nor natural capacity to be antisocial. He wanted to like all the people whom he met, the same way that most of those people liked the little boy. He didn't know that his parents were very careful to keep him away from people that didn't like him, and so the little boy grew up surrounded by the verbal and mental praise of others. Not everyone loved the little boy, of course, but most did, and the constant flood of warm, affectionate thoughts towards him was enough to drown out the temporary bursts of anger and pain.

Every person who the little boy could hear had a little darkness, after all. The little boy knew that he had some darkness too, so he didn't blame the adults over trying to hide their own. He figured everyone must have darkness, except maybe his mother and father because they were heroes (and they were also among those whom he couldn't hear, even when he really, really tried). Given his experience, the little boy decided that actions mattered infinitely more than whatever was going on inside someone's head, the contents of which was liable to change more frequently than the tides. Hearing darkness was . . . simply part of existence, like breathing and refusing to fall asleep before Mother's bedtime stories and Father's nightly meditation training about how to block everything out so that the little boy could better hear *himself*.

By the time he was five, the little boy had become better at not hearing. Or rather, as his father phrased it, "deciding not to listen." Other's thoughts were still there, but it usually felt more like the background babble of a brook than a herald's trumpet. Some people were still loud enough to make the migraines flair again, but just as many were as silent as his parents. Despite being forced to grow up a little too fast, the boy was happy. Sheltered, he took safety for a given, confident in his parents' protection and the triumph of people's better natures to protect him from the darkness.

Naivety inevitably self-destructs.

Every day, his parents reminded the little boy of The Rules.

The Rules were thus:

If someone thinks something surprising, look down at your hands or at the sky instead of staring.

If someone unexpectedly calls your name, check to make sure that their lips are moving before you reply.

Finally, most importantly, never ever under any circumstances repeat someone's inside words with your outside voice.

Usually, the little boy was very good at following The Rules. He forgot sometimes, especially when he got sleepy or excited, but his rare slip-ups in public were always quickly covered up by his parents who would chuckle and glibly comment on the "surprising insightfulness of children." Mostly, the little boy lived a happy life by constantly pretending to be clueless. It didn't matter if all his friends were the children of his parents' coworkers: even if they objected to playing with him at first, the boy learned to quickly win over his playmates and make them like him.

The little boy preferred when people liked him because then he didn't have to overhear as much of their darkness.

It was during one of these playdates with a parental-approved friend that the little boy heard a thought that he didn't want to hear. He had heard many such thoughts, of course, but this was the first one that felt *important*.

The thought in question belonged to his friend Kiya's father, Mr. Hamdy. The little boy had met Mrs. Hamdy before, although it had taken him almost a year to realize that Mrs. Hamdy's name was Mrs. Hamdy and not just "Fortitude." Mrs. Hamdy was usually the one to pick up Kiya after their playdates, but she was on a "work field trip" with the little boy's father, and so it was Mr. Hamdy that came to pick Kiya up from the little boy's house.

From the moment his mother welcomed Mr. Hamdy into their house, Mr. Hamdy's thoughts were ALL darkness.

Disgusting, Mr. Hamdy thought as he smiled down at the little boy. *I can't believe Miriam lets our kid be exposed to this freak.*

"Did you have fun, Kiya?" Mr. Hamdy gently asked his daughter.

It's fine, Mr. Hamdy reassured himself. *It'll be fine. Miriam isn't coming back from this mission—Rudzite promised. The explosion will be in Latvia, for fuck's sake. It can't be traced back to me, and I'll finally be able to take Kiya away from this shitshow circus.*

"Where's Latvia?" the little boy asked.

Mr. Hamdy's hand, which had been stroking the top of Kiya's head, froze. The little boy's mother frowned.

"What did Miriam tell you about the mission?" she asked Mr. Hamdy in a low voice.

Mr. Hamdy forced a laugh. *Shit. Why did the brat say that?* "Nothing, per the usual."

"Why are you lying?" the little boy asked. "Are Daddy and Mrs. Hamdy in trouble?"

Mr. Hamdy looked at the boy's mother. The boy's mother looked at Mr. Hamdy. Decades later, the little boy would decipher the silent exchange of expressions that passed between them, but at that moment all he could hear was Mr. Hamdy's thoughts filled with bad words and even badder intentions.

Mr. Hamdy lunged, Kiya stumbling to the side. The little boy saw what the man wanted do to his mom—*wrap my hands around the bitch's throat, squeeze before she can react*—and the little boy knew that all this was happening because he had asked where Latvia was.

"I'm sorry!" the little boy screamed as his mother evaded Mr. Hamdy's attack.

The boy's knees buckled. He fell onto the carpet, hands clutched over his ears. But Mr. Hamdy's darkness was still so loud.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" the little boy wept. "Forget I said it! Forget I said it! Please please *please* forget it! Forget it! Forget!"

And so . . . Mr. Hamdy forgot.

Kiya didn't come to play after that. The little boy's parents introduced a new person named Fortitude, because "Mrs. Hamdy needs to be with her daughter right now." They never told the little boy what happened to Mr. Hamdy (decades later, he would dig up the trial transcripts). His parents did tell his breaking the rules had ended up saving his dad from bad guys far away, but that was abstract and they couldn't tell him enough information for the story to make sense. All the little boy knew was that his mom almost gotten hurt and he lost a friend because he'd spoken someone's inside words with his outside voice.

The solution was obvious: the little boy wouldn't speak.

He still communicated with his parents, of course, by sending his thoughts to them and letting them send theirs in return. But his voice went unused for almost a year, no matter how much his parents tried to cajole him into talking. If he talked out loud, bad things might happen again. It was safer and easier to just think things to his dad and mom. If they decided something needed to be vocalized, that was fine, because his mother and father were superheroes. Unlike the little boy, they wouldn't say the wrong thing. They would keep everyone safe.

Even when the little boy learned that he was going to be a big brother, he hugged both his parents with a big smile and thought "*I'm so happy!*" but he still didn't speak.

He didn't speak until he met the baby.

The baby was LOUD in a way the little boy had never encountered before. The baby's pain was loud, its confusion was loud, its annoyance at the overhead light was loud. But for all the screaming emotions and thoughts, there was no darkness whatsoever, and the little boy decided then and there that he'd do his best to make sure the baby's thoughts stayed that way as much as possible. When his—*their—*mother spoke to the baby, the baby calmed down, recognizing her voice.

The little boy wanted the baby to recognize him that way as well. But what to say?

Perhaps it was best to start with a compliment. People's thoughts always became lighter when he complimented them.

The little boy cleared his throat, testing rusty vocal cords. He looked gravely down at the baby: this was an important moment, where the baby would learn *his* voice.

"You're cute as a button," he said.

[Jun 30, 2023](#)

Round 1: Family History

Glitch: Dead Dad card!

Kent: . . .

Glitch, pointing to Kent: Dead Mom card!

Kent winces.

Grayson: What is this?

Jo: An argument y'all keep having inside my head, so it's getting written down. My sincerest apologies to the audience.

Grayson: Inside your head? Excuse me?

Jo: Roll with it.

Sally: In that case, double jeopardy! Orphan card!

Ambrose: . . . Ah, I have that card as well.

Shard: Shut up about your past, Kim. No one cares.

Glitch, to Sally: You were raised by two doting parents, plus your bio folks could still be alive. Disqualified.

Sally: But! Consider the deep-rooted abandonment issues.

Nick: Except you don't really have those?

Sally: Shut up. My issues are robust and plentiful.

Nick: Not arguing with that, but your issues have nothing to do with being adopted.

Sally: Are you accusing me of being well-adjusted? How dare you.

Grayson: I'm certain that Nick only meant that your family is enviably close.

Nick: Enviably? Oh, right. Gray has the "Shitty Father" card.

Glitch: Yeah, well, Kenzie has that card, too!

Kent's wince deepens.

Grayson: Pain isn't a competition.

Sally: Except this is literally a Painful Past competition.

Glitch: In which case, Sir Black here is immediately disqualified.

Glitch makes a shooping motion towards Gray.

Glitch: Go on, get! Back to your ivory tower, princeling.

Grayson, dryly: You've never been to England, have you.

Glitch: I'm deathly allergic to unseasoned food.

Nick: So, only people with dead parents are allowed troubled childhoods? That seems reductive.

Sally: True, I still have the "Tragic Prophet" trope to lean on, don't I? Okay, I'm dropping the Orphan Card. My *real* parents are alive.

Nick: That's what I said earlier, but you got mad at me!

Sally: Because you said that I had issues!

Nick: I was agreeing with you!

Ambrose: This is ridiculous.

Shard: *You're* ridiculous.

Glitch: Also, this round is only about our family circumstances. At least your family histories don't necessitate monthly hospital check-ins. Thanks for the bum brain, Daddio!

Kent: Your brain isn't bum.

Glitch smirks, façade of bitterness falling away now that he's achieved his goal of being complimented.

Glitch: Because I'm a genius, right?

Kent (solemnly, fully aware that he's being manipulated): Right.

Grayson: Still, I don't think that our pasts are something we should be competing over.

Ambrose: Agreed.

Glitch: You two only say that because Gray has led a charmed life, and Rosy doesn't want to talk about his sister.

Ambrose: Parker. That's enough.

Shard: Parker isn't wrong, however.

For a long moment, no one dares to speak. The air is fraught with tension until . . .

Nick: Then I declare myself the winner!

Sally: Declaration rejected.

Glitch: You grew up rich with two parents who loved you and an adorable, still-alive little sibling. That's not even enough to place bronze.

Nick: Two words: *Vengeance Button*.

Sally: Oof.

Kent: . . .

Glitch: I concede their existence to be a semi-valid argument.

Sally: Then do I get points as well? Since Button is my best friend.

Glitch: Maybe half a point? This round is supposed to be about our families.

Sally: Button is as much my family as my dads.

Ambrose: I'm leaving.

Shard: Coward.

Jo: No one's leaves until I announce the winner.

Ambrose: Then announce it already.

Glitch: **drumroll noises**

Sally: Ignore the author; she's pretending to be in control again. This is a democracy.

Nick: Should we put it to a vote, then?

Grayson: Is this really something we should be voting on?

Sally: Yes.

Nick: Yes.

Glitch: Hell yes.

Ambrose: *No.*

Kent: . . .

Grayson: It feels in bad taste.

Ambrose: It *is* in bad taste.

Nick: Well, we can stop talking about it if we vote.

Sally: I vote for Button, then.

Shard scoffs.

Nick: I vote for Gray.

Glitch: Why the hell would you vote for Ritchie-Rich?

Nick: I wanted him to feel included.

Grayson: Thank you, but I'm perfectly content to not be in the running.

Glitch: The only thing bad ever to happen to Little Lord Fauntleroy was the death of his first pony.

Grayson: I never owned a pony.

Glitch: Thoroughbred horse, then.

Grayson: . . . Her name was Black Beauty.

Glitch: For real?

Grayson: No.

Ambrose and Nick both chuckle, then glare at each other.

Nick: Does anyone even know enough about Kim to vote for him?

Shard: I do.

Nick: Fuck off, you brain parasite. No one cares what you have to say.

Shard: Such a child.

Nick: A child who you almost killed!

Jo, clearing throat: Keep on topic, kiddos. Story Events aren't until Round 3.

Ambrose: This author is sick and twisted.

Shard: Hypocrite.

Kent, quietly: I want this to be over.

Glitch, expression guilty, stares at Kent. Some events, even dark humor shouldn't touch.

Glitch: You know what? I've changed my mind. This competition is stupid.

Sally: That's quite the one-eighty. Afraid that you won't win?

Ambrose: There's no victory to be found in something like this.

Glitch: Agreed Let's move on.

Grayson: I'd love nothing more, but the author said that—

Glitch, glaring at everyone except Kent: We've already established that the author isn't in control. This topic is getting *dropped*.

Kent: Thanks, Ferro.

[MB Saucy Side: Sunset \(Featuring Kent\)](#)

[Jul 1, 2023](#)

You squint into the glare of the almost-but-not-quite sunset, surveying the vacant beach for a flat spot to place down the two collapsible chairs that Kent is holding. Those chairs must be almost thirty years old by this point (the once neon pink plastic faded to a pale coral) but they're still comfortable with seats high enough that Kent's knees don't give out when standing back up. Kent and you have watched sunsets from those chairs ever since you purchased them from an enthusiastic street vendor in Mikonos during your twenty-fifth anniversary.

Kent doesn't carry the chairs under one arm with the thoughtless ease that he once did. His back bends under the chair weight and his balance falters on the sand as you both head towards a clearing next to the tidepools. The rusty hinges groan in protest as Kent unfolds them; Kent and you groan as well as you sit down. Your husband's grey eyes, hidden behind a pair of prescription bifocal sunshades, remain affixed upon the setting sun as his hand reaches over the armrest to hold yours. Your fingers entwine together, the gesture so habitual that neither of you bothers to glance down.

"I love you," Kent says.

You look over and see the same boy with whom you first fell in love: tall and shameless, standing at the front door with nothing but a towel slung over his lean hips. You don't notice Kent's silver hair (thinner than it used to be) or his waistline (thicker than it used to be). In every important way, he's exactly the same. Better, because he's no longer a mystery.

Kent raises your hand to his lips and places a gentle kiss upon its back. Five years ago, his kiss would've inspired you to crawl onto his lap and return the favor, but sex can't be spontaneous the way that it used to be. Intimacy now requires pills and lotions and the king-sized Tempur-pedic mattress back in your bedroom. Occasionally you miss the fervor of youth, but your spine can't bend the way it used to.

You smile at Kent. "Remember Berlin?"

Even now, after over fifty years of marriage, you can still make Kent blush. Berlin happened a week after he proposed: you forget which DJ had been playing at that nightclub, long since closed down, but you remember in vivid detail Kent pulling you into a private booth and pressing you down onto the hard leather couch. His touch had been impatient and rough, his thrusts in tempo with the pulsating music beyond the door.

"It's loud out there," he'd whispered into your ear. *"No one can hear you."*

Both of you had taken advantage of that fact.

. . . That urgency is a thing of the past. Your skin is softer than it used to be, more fragile, your wedding bands both resized to fit over arthritic knuckles. Kent kisses your hand again, his thin lips pressing against the wrinkles and sunspots that testify to your shared years together.

It's been a good life.

The sky's hazy blue intensifies to pink-streaked purple, a brilliant golden halo flaring in the center. You don't avert your eyes: you're too old to care about whether or not it's safe to stare directly into the light. The sunset is beautiful, and you want to absorb it all.

"Telluride," Kent says, and you realize that your husband still has the ability to make your cheeks heat as well.

Unlike most places on your and Kent's completed bucket list, you hadn't gone to Colorado for vacation. Kent and Sally had been assigned to investigate a suspicious ski resort that marketed itself as catering to the "mentally elite." Eight days into the mission, Kent had broken out of the "resort" (which, unsurprisingly, had turned out to be a Ment supremacist cult compound) at 2am and run over three miles . . . through *snow*.

All so that he could spend twenty minutes with you in the MIV van. His devotion had been desperate from having spent a week apart, and the van lacked adequate cushioning to compensate for his insistence. Your tailbone ended up bruised (awful, given that you'd spent another three days monitoring them from the van), and even a high turtleneck hadn't fully been able to cover the marks you'd left upon Kent's pale skin.

"Back in my day, we walked through the snow," had quickly become an inside joke between you two after that, much to Glitch and Sally's mystification.

"Chicago," you say, chuckling at the memory. "Our retirement party."

Kent smirks. "We celebrated properly."

"In the best possible way."

Perhaps it hadn't been the most polite move to bail on your guests and family at a party held in your shared honor, but it had also been the last day you and Kent possessed access to the Aeon building. You should've known that Kent didn't have a simple walk down memory lane in mind when he'd stolen you away from the UCRT headquarters where the party was being held and taken you down to the fourteenth floor.

"Room 1" had felt as small and cramped the day you'd first evaluated it decades prior, when your freshman mind whirled with silly ideas on how to entrap a yet unknown Ment within. In fact, the room felt smaller than you remembered, given that Kent's tall body took up most of the space despite the shelves no longer lining the wall.

Thank goodness that the shelves had been removed, otherwise you and Kent might have ended up crushed beneath them. Granted, that moment hadn't *quite* the energy level of Berlin or Telluride (neither of your twenties, after all), but it had served as an enthusiastic (and pleasurable) farewell to Aeon. Worth it, even if Sally had never quite forgiven you for missing her speech.

The sky is dimmer now, the sun almost completely vanished beyond the steadily lapping ocean waves. The sunset's once vibrant colors fade to darkness, edges a lingering pastel pink that almost matches the shade of your and Kent's old beach chairs.

"Should we head back home?" Kent asks.

"Just a little longer." You squeeze Kent's hand tighter, and he looks away from the sunset to smile at you tenderly.

"Of course," he says.

[MB Saucy Side: Sunset \(Featuring Kenna\)](#)

[Jul 1, 2023](#)

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The sky's hazy blue intensifies to pink-streaked purple, a brilliant golden halo flaring in the center. You don't avert your eyes: you're too old to care about whether or not it's safe to stare directly into the light. The sunset is beautiful, and you want to absorb it all.

"Telluride," Kenna says, and you realize that your wife still has the ability to make your cheeks heat as well.

Unlike most places on your and Kenna's completed bucket list, you hadn't gone to Colorado for vacation. Kenna and Sally had been assigned to investigate a suspicious ski resort that marketed itself as catering to the "mentally elite." Eight days into the mission, Kenna had broken out of the "resort" (which, unsurprisingly, had turned out to be a Ment supremist cult compound) at 2am and run over three miles . . . through *snow*.

All so that she could spend twenty minutes with you in the MIV van. Her devotion had been desperate from having spent a week apart, and the van lacked adequate cushioning to compensate for her insistence. Your tailbone ended up bruised (awful, given that you'd spent another three days monitoring them from the van), and even a high turtleneck hadn't fully been able to cover the marks you'd left upon Kenna's pale skin.

"Back in my day, we walked through the snow," had quickly become an inside joke between you two after that, much to Glitch and Sally's mystification.

"Chicago," you say, chuckling at the memory. "Our retirement party."

Kenna smirks. "We celebrated properly."

"In the best possible way."

Perhaps it hadn't been the most polite move to bail on your guests and family at a party held in your shared honor, but it had also been the last day you and Kenna possessed access to the Aeon building. You should've known that Kenna didn't have a simple walk down memory lane in mind when she'd

stolen you away from the UCRT headquarters where the party was being held and taken you down to the fourteenth floor.

“Room 1” had felt as small and cramped the day you’d first evaluated it decades prior, when your freshman mind whirled with silly ideas on how to entrap a yet unknown Ment within. In fact, the room felt smaller than you remembered, given that Kenna’s body took up most of the space despite the shelves no longer lining the wall.

Thank goodness that the shelves had been removed, otherwise you and Kenna might have end up crushed beneath them. Granted, that moment hadn’t *quite* the energy level of Berlin or Telluride (neither of your twenties, after all), but it had served as an enthusiastic (and pleasurable) farewell to Aeon. Worth it, even if Sally had never quite forgiven you for missing her speech.

The sky is dimmer now, the sun almost completely vanished beyond the steadily lapping ocean waves. The sunset’s once vibrant colors fade to darkness, edges a lingering pastel pink that matches the shade of your and Kenna’s old beach chairs.

“Should we head back home?” Kenna asks.

“Just a little longer.” You squeeze Kenna’s hand tighter, and she looks away from the sunset to smile at you tenderly.

“Of course,” she says.

[MB Short Story: Chibi-Mode](#)

[Jul 30, 2023](#)

The only thing canonical about this story is Nick’s name for Kent.

But it was fun to write :)

* * *

“It’s my snack!” The child puffed out her cheeks belligerently, clutching the Tupperware container to her chest. Her defiant brown eyes more closely resembled those of hardened gladiator than a seven-year-old girl. Clearly, she was prepared to defend her property to the death.

“Ambrose said you had to share,” argued a boy of similar age. “Ambrose is the oldest, so he’s in charge.”

The little girl shook her head vigorously, rattling the beaded ends of her braids. “Rosy s’not in charge of ME,” she insisted. “Mama and I made these pralines together, so they’re MINE.”

“I shared my grandma’s pierniki with you,” the boy reminded her.

The girl wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like gingerbread, though,” she stated. “I like pralines.”

“I like pralines, too.”

“But these ones are MINE.”

“You still have to share.”

Talia glared at the boy who, up until now, she had considered to be her bestest ever friend. “Stop being greedy, Kent,” she ordered. “If I share with you then I have to share with Sally, and that’ll kill her because she’s allergic to peanuts.”

They both glanced over at the freckled girl in the corner, who was currently weeping while trying to disentangle a Lego piece from her red curls.

“Sally cries a lot,” Kent sighed, “but I don’t want her killed.”

“I don’t want her killed either,” Talia replied, “which is why I can’t share any of my pralines with you.” She smiled smugly, satisfied that he’d accepted her logic. The fact that Talia didn’t know whether or not Sally had a peanut allergy was irrelevant.

Kent was Talia’s bestest ever friend, but he was also a little bit stupid. Talia liked that about him because it meant he always let her have the final word on things.

Kent gnawed his bottom lip, still uncertain. “Except Ambrose said—”

“Do you want Sally to drop dead, Kent?” Talia demanded. “I saw someone drop dead from a peanut allergy once. They got real red in the face and started choking—” Talia grabbed her neck and made gasping noises to illustrate— “and then BOOM they dropped dead!”

(This was admittedly an exaggeration, but Talia *had* witnessed her cousin Jayden stabbed with an epi-pen at the last family barbeque. It had been very dramatic, and also satisfying because she didn’t much like Jayden.)

Kent’s pale face grew even paler. “I don’t want anyone to drop dead.”

“Because you’re a hero, Kent,” Talia said firmly. “That’s why I can’t share my pralines with you.”

Kent walked away to help Sally retrieve the Lego from her hair, and Talia felt a tiny twinge of guilt. But Kent didn’t understand. Talia couldn’t share these pralines; they were too precious. Pralines had been

Daddy's favorite, and this was the first time that Mama had made them since his death. The next batch, she'd share with Kent and maybe even Sally if the girl ever got her act together and stopped blubbering.

"Miss Parker."

Talia turned around to face the newcomer, hastily hiding the Tupperware behind her back. From the exasperated expression on the older boy's expression, he wasn't fooled.

"I overheard your conversation with Zarneki." Ambrose Kim, age twelve, spoke with the solemnity and gravitas of a disappointed teacher.

Talia rolled her eyes. Because he was the oldest in their after-school program, Rosy acted like he was everybody's boss. He'd been the one who'd convinced Kent not to assist Talia with Operation Water Balloon, and she still wasn't certain how Rosy had learned about her plans to run away during naptime last week.

"My mama says that eavesdropping isn't polite," Talia snapped at him.

Ambrose's gaze narrowed. "Did your mother also say that you should share those snacks?"

Talia fidgeted, the seed of guilt that she'd felt earlier beginning to sprout. Her mama had told her to share the pralines, but . . .

"She said they were just for me," Talia lied. "Go away, Nosy Rosy."

Ambrose crossed his arms. He was short for his age, barely even taller than Talia. He was scrawny, too, and he had a weirdo habit of just standing in the corner and just . . . *staring* at people. Not to mention that Ambrose usually spoke even less than Kent did. So why did Talia feel so intimidated, as if her deception was being called out by an actual adult?

Whatever the reason, she hated it.

Talia raised her chin and glared at the middle of Rosy's forehead (meeting his eyes was a little too scary). "These pralines are just for me," she doubled down. "It's my birthday!"

Today was not her birthday.

"Today is not your birthday," Ambrose refuted.

"Is too!"

"It is not. Your birthday is January 24th."

Talia squinted at him suspiciously. "How'd you know?"

"Put the snacks back in your bag," Ambrose instructed, ignoring her question. "Next time, don't take something out if you are unwilling to share."

"You're not gonna tattle to Ms. Adsila on me?" Talia asked.

Ambrose shrugged. "Why would I? The snacks are yours." He turned away, then paused. "The friends are yours as well, Miss Parker," he commented. "To keep or to lose. Something to think about."

* * * *

It took Kent over ten minutes to dislodge the entangled Lego from Sally's hair, mostly because the younger girl couldn't stop crying and flinched away at the slightest tug of a curl. Kent had been tempted to ask Talia if he could borrow her craft scissors, but his best friend was behaving . . . weird today.

"It's out," he finally informed Sally with relief, holding up the plastic brick for her inspection.

She sniffed gratefully, rubbing her sleeve across her face to wipe away tears. Unfortunately, the gesture only succeeded in smearing snot across her left cheek.

"Why'd you put a Lego in your hair, anyway?" Kent asked, trying not to stare at the snot streak.

Sally shook her head.

"You didn't?" Kent asked.

She nodded.

"Was Clarence bullying you again?"

The girl looked away, refusing to answer.

Kent sighed. Sally was still a baby—she was only five, after all. He had to be patient with her. "Are you allergic to any nuts?" he asked.

Another headshake.

Kent had already figured as much. He didn't know why Talia had fibbed about Sally's allergy, but he trusted that it must be for a good reason. Or at least, a reason that Talia didn't want to talk about. That was fine, because Kent had a lot of things that he didn't want to talk about as well. Usually, that was why he and Talia got along so well: she did almost all of the talking.

Still, he'd really wanted to try a praline. He couldn't remember the last time Talia had brought some in.

Kent stood and offered Sally his hand. She grabbed it, her fingers suspiciously sticky. Kent hated the sensation, but he couldn't just leave Sally alone, not when she reminded him of the small rabbit he'd

found in his grandparents' backyard. The poor thing had been trapped between the metal fence links and had trembled with terror the entire time Kent had worked to free it.

Sally gazed up at him, an unspoken question in her red-rimmed eyes.

"Let's get your face cleaned up," Kent said.

She nodded, then used the back of Kent's hand to wipe her nose again.

The classroom only had one sink, in the bathroom next to the cubbies, and it was already in use. Kent and Sally waited outside the door, Sally's tight hold on his hand cutting off circulation.

The bathroom door opened, and Nick Wiseman, age nine, emerged. "Hey there, Kentucky Fried Chicken," he greeted Kent, his wide smile revealing a top set of red-banded braces. "What's shaken except bacon?" He threw back his head and laughed uproariously at his own juvenile brilliance.

Kent wordlessly held up the hand that Sally still held.

Nick's smile flattened as he registered the girl's red eyes and snotty nose. "What happened?"

"A Lego got caught in her hair," Kent explained.

"Because someone put it there?"

Kent shrugged. Nick Wiseman took his role as protector very seriously, and Sally fell under his aegis by virtue of being his baby sibling's best friend. Since Kent hadn't seen Clarence harassing Sally, it felt irresponsible to voice suspicions.

"I was worried that something like this might happen today since Button isn't here," Nick sighed. He squatted down so that he and Sally were at eye level. "Did someone do this to you, Salome?"

"Where's Button?" Sally asked, her squeaky voice catching Kent off guard. So she did speak, after all.

Nick scratched the back of his neck. "Chickenpox," he said. "Button'll be back in week or so."

"I want Button," Sally insisted.

"You can't tell me what happened instead?"

The five-year-old cast the older boy a look of pure disdain. "You're not Button."

Nick forced a laugh and glanced at Kent. "I'll take over from here," he said. "Thanks for looking out for her."

Kent nodded. Sally released his hand, and he surreptitiously wiped it on the side of his pants.

"I want Button," Sally repeated.

"You can come over to our house later, squirt," Nick said. "Once Button feels better and you're not a snot-face."

Sally glared at him. "I'm not a snot-face."

"You sure are a snot face," Nick retorted. "Probably should go get washed up."

The little girl stalked past Nick into the bathroom and slammed the door shut. Then she reopened the door, stuck her tongue out at Nick, and slammed shut the door for a second time.

"You're the snot face, Nicholas!" she yelled from the other side.

Nick chuckled. "Yeah, she'll be fine."

Those two had a very odd relationship, Kent decided as he rejoined Talia over by the bookshelves.

* * * *

"Are you mad at me?"

Kent looked up from the book he was reading (an Eyewitness book on large cats) and turned towards Talia. She was nervously chewing the edge of her thumb cuticle, the chapter book she'd selected earlier (*Beezus and Ramona*) lying unopened beside her on the rug.

"Because you lied?" Kent asked bluntly.

Talia nodded. She didn't seem surprised that he already knew.

"No," Kent said.

"*Really?*" Talia leaned forward. "Really, really?"

"Really."

Talia frowned. "Why aren't you mad at me, though?"

Kent squinted at her. Was that a trick question? "You're my friend."

"Yeah, but friends shouldn't lie to each other."

"Well, I didn't lie to you," Kent pointed out.

"I know that, dummy!" Talia's lips pursed in a pout. "But I lied to you, so you should be mad."

"Do you want me to be mad?"

"Of course I don't want you to be mad at me!" Talia immediately protested. "But you should be. It's the rule."

Kent frowned. Personally, he didn't see the point. His dad was always angry, and all that negative emotion seemed exhausting to carry around. Talia didn't want to share her pralines this time. Kent didn't know why, but he knew that there must be a reason other than Sally's fake nut allergy. Talia wasn't a greedy person.

Well, okay, Talia was pretty greedy, but she still usually shared with Kent.

"Are you mad?" he asked, turning the question around.

Talia looked confused. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"At yourself," Kent clarified.

She took a moment to consider. "A little," she finally admitted. "I need to get better at lying. It's annoying that you always catch on."

Kent closed his eyes and nodded sagely. He wasn't certain that adults would approve of Talia's conclusion, but it made sense. If Kent were a better liar, maybe his dad wouldn't always be as angry with him.

"I'll share my pralines next time," Talia promised.

"Sure," Kent replied, returning his attention to his book.

"You're really not mad?" Talia asked again.

Truthfully, Kent was beginning to get upset, but only because Talia wouldn't shut up and let him get back to reading.

"I'm not mad," he mumbled.

"But now you look mad," Talia argued. "You didn't look mad before, but now you do! You look super mad."

Kent didn't reply, instead choosing to try and focus on reading the description of lion prides. Talia poked his ribs.

"Why are you mad?" she demanded. "You promised that you weren't mad."

Kent lifted his book higher, obscuring his face. Talia repeated the question a dozen more times, but he refused to answer and eventually she had to concede defeat.

"I'll fix this!" Talia declared, standing up. "Once I do, you're not allowed to be mad at me anymore!"

Kent sighed with relief after she departed. The misunderstanding was unfortunate, he supposed, but at least now he could finish his book in peace.

* * * *

Later that evening, an old woman stared in confusion at the tissue that she'd retrieved from her grandson's backpack. Half of a smushed praline was still wrapped within, the other half having crumpled on the bus ride back home. Everything inside the bag was sticky as a result—it would need to be emptied, and the sugary residue rinsed out with hot water.

The old woman shook her head, both dismayed and amused. Kent had just gone to bed, which meant that answers would have to wait until the morning.

[MB Saucy Side: An Idiot's Guide To Sexting \(Ambrose Version\)](#)

[Jul 30, 2023](#)

Ambrose Kim wasn't accustomed to being bad at things.

Romance *ought* to be a learnable skill, he deduced. And yet . . .

The first time Ambrose bought flowers for his beloved, he'd carefully selected a bouquet of hyacinths which the florist informed him had the meaning of "love, happiness, and a sincere desire for forgiveness." Perfect, Ambrose had thought, until Wiseman burst into giggles and merrily informed him that 'Hyacinth' was the middle name of their immature older brother. Although their laughter had been enchanting (at the time, Ambrose had made the mental comparison to fairy bells then become nauseated at the pathetic poeticism), he couldn't help but feel dissatisfied over his first romantic gift being transformed into a joke.

Similarly, Ambrose's first attempt to arrange a romantic outing had resulted in the wind blowing his carefully packed picnic basket being blown into Lake Michigan. When he'd attempted to salvage the day by booking a nearby hotel for what his love called a "staycation," the ensuite jacuzzi had burst a pipe and flooded them out. The only available room which the hotel could offer had twin beds, so they'd simply headed home. It was as if the universe sought revenge for Ambrose's past wrongdoings, intent on reminding him that no, he *didn't* deserve to be this happy.

The hour was late. Instead of being asleep (he was customarily in bed by 11pm, prompt), Ambrose scowled at his illuminated laptop screen as if personally offended by the web search results. “I’m a fool,” he muttered under his breath before clicking on the third result with a defeated groan.

How to Sext: The Ultimate Guide To Sexting, With Examples!

The ‘examples’ part of the headline bothered him (shouldn’t this kind of intimacy be personalized rather than a template?), but the ‘ultimate guide’ description at least promised general hints. It felt humiliating to resort to the internet for assistance, but Ambrose’s last response to his beloved’s late-night text had apparently been the wrong reply (a fact which Wiseman had informed Ambrose a phone call later, their words barely discernable over hysterical laughing).

‘An adorkable idiot,’ they’d called him.

But, really, how was Ambrose supposed to intuit that the answer to “What r u wearing?” shouldn’t have been the truth? He’d been wearing a windbreaker because he’d just arrived home from a late night at the office, and that’s what he had typed back. He’d also provided his jacket size, wrongfully assuming that his partner planned on going shopping while on assignment in NYC and that was why they’d asked about his attire.

In Ambrose’s defense, sexting wasn’t a pastime previously introduced to their relationship, nor one with which he had engaged with past lovers. Granted, Ambrose’s prior ‘relationships’ had all been more a battle-buddies-with-benefits dynamic than anything else, far different than his current lifelong commitment.

Ambrose smiled slightly at the mental reminder that Wiseman was *his* . . . only to let out a defeated groan, the back of his head thunking against the headrest of his office chair. Above all else, he didn’t want to disappoint them.

Damnit. He was bad at this.

Ambrose refocused on the article.

Step 1: Learn your partner’s lust language.

Ambrose frowned. How frustratingly vague.

He knew what Wiseman liked, of course: hugs from behind, surprise breakfast muffins from their favorite bakery, when he called them by their first name instead of “Wiseman.” But the exact nature of their physical desires? Those depended upon mood and the time of day. His beloved was many things, but never predictable.

Also, Ambrose didn’t think that texting ‘I bought you a muffin, blueberry this time’ would be deemed satisfactorily sexy.

His eyes reluctantly strayed down the webpage's given examples.

I'm going to mark you as my territory.

What was he, a dog?

You won't be able to move after I'm finished with you.

Texting that would feel like stating the obvious.

After a moment of contemplation, Ambrose reached for his phone and tapped out a quick text:

"The scent of you still lingers on our bedsheets. Come back home to me before it fades away."

He stared at the text for several minutes before deleting it with a groan. No, those words were about his own desire. The last thing he wanted to do was guilt trip Wiseman for accepting an assignment when it would help to advance their career at Aeon.

Perhaps another example would help? Ambrose glanced back at the webpage.

You're going to pulse with pleasure tonight.

Far too ambiguous. As Ambrose told his students: when formulating a plan, it behooved one to consider the specifics. He returned to his phone and tried again:

"I want to—"

Ambrose's fingers stilled as he envisioned all the things that he wanted to do to Wiseman that would make them 'pulse' once they returned. Far too many things to detail over text. Where would he even start? At a loss, he returned to the article.

Step 2: Emojis can be a playful way of showing your affection!

Not happening. There was nothing remotely arousing about pixelated vegetables.

Step 3: Be enthusiastic and playful.

Hmm. Showing his appreciation wasn't a bad idea; god knew that he appreciated Wiseman's involvement in his life. In fact, Ambrose didn't consider it an exaggeration to say that, before Wiseman, he had never really *lived*. He quickly deleted his last, half-formed message and typed:

"You've changed everything for me."

Ambrose sighed. The statement was true, but was it erotic? Not quite. Once again, he'd missed the mark.

Back to the drawing board.

Five web articles and twenty-seven half-written texts later, Ambrose conceded defeat. He'd have to devise an alternative approach.

* * * *

Your hand grapples in the darkness for the buzzing phone on your nightstand. Once grabbed, you turn it on to see the hour illuminated onscreen.

2:32 fucking AM.

If Nick is late-night texting recipes again, you'll kill him. You've explained on more than one occasion that your slumber is NOT to be disturbed by boysenberry shortcake pictures.

Bleary-eyed, you thumb down the text notification.

And immediately jolt upwards in bed, suddenly wide-awake.

Ambrose's photo fills your screen. It's a selfie, which is shocking not just because Ambrose *never* takes selfies but because this particular selfie is . . .

You swallow, mouth suddenly dry.

The selfie is suggestive, to say the least.

Ambrose lies on his back, in bed, one arm tucked beneath his head and the other outstretched to hold out the camera. He's shirtless, a look which you've always appreciated because hiding shoulders that wide and solid beneath fabric really ought to be a crime.

Honestly, Ambrose's entire chest is a work of art designed for tactile enjoyment. You've run your hands across his broad pectorals, traced your fingertips over the intriguing dips and divots delineating his abs. The phrase 'rock-hard' always struck you as inaccurate when referring to muscles: rock is cold and unforgiving; Ambrose's body is warm, firm but pliant. Hard if he flexes, of course, but you far prefer when Ambrose is relaxed and wrapped around you like a bulky security blanket.

Your man isn't tall, but he's *big*. Height is rendered totally irrelevant when someone is built with the structural stability of brick house. (Although Ambrose rolls his eyes whenever you serenade him with the Commodores' song.)

No, Ambrose is perfect.

Perfect everywhere, a fact which you can't help but appreciate given the sheerness of the single sheet covering the lower half of Ambrose's otherwise nude body. In fact, you're so enraptured admiring the man who you love that it takes your brain a moment to register the triangle in the middle of the screen.

Oh.

This isn't a selfie; it's a video.

You press play.

"I miss you." Ambrose's voice is rough and husky, his free hand straying downwards to the edge of the sheet. A hint of a growl rumbles through his next words: "I miss you so fucking much. Let me show—"

You pause the video. Something tells you that this particular private viewing requires a locked bedroom door.

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[Jul 30, 2023](#)

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[MB Sneak Peak: Grayson Epilogue](#)

[Jul 31, 2023](#)

Note:

This is only the first portion of Gray's epilogue, as second part includes a major moment that is a lot more satisfying if played through instead of read as code. That being said, I simplified the text to make it semi-readable, so please keep in mind that the epilogue you get in-game will do a much better job of reflecting your choices. For example, I deleted most options here in favor of only showing the one taken.

Each RO has their own epilogue, as does Singleton Button and Vengeance Button. Every RO epilogue file is over 10,000 words (one particular character's file is over double that), because there's a LOT of variability to reflect your choices made during game playthrough.

I considered providing an option to break things off with your RO in the epilogue, but it felt random and kinda went against the whole point of evening having the little slice of fluff at the end. So romance with caution, because love lasts in Mind Blind.

* * * *

It's over.

The battle is won, the villain defeated, and the princess rescued (although Nick still grumbles when you call him that).

*if (NPOtraining)

Almost four years have passed since you saved Chicago; not entirely without incident, of course, given your line of work. During your sophomore year, a disgraced AMO tried to murder you. Twice. There was also the time that you were kidnapped by a cult . . .

*if (Interpersonal > 50)

although that particular incident ended up working to your advantage after you convinced the cultists to anoint you as their high priest.

*elseif (Insightful > 50)

although that particular incident ended up working to your advantage after you pointed out the flaws in their doctrine and rewrote their religious texts to embrace a more pro-Ment philosophy.

*elseif (Innovative > 50)

although that particular incident ended up working to your advantage, since it provided you an opportunity to demolish their central compound.

*elseif (Effort > 50)

although that particular incident ended up working to your advantage, since it provided you with an opportunity to set fire to their central compound. The arson had been accidental, the result of knocking over one of the ritual candles lit for your sacrifice, but you decided not to include that detail in your report.

*else

although that particular incident ended up working to your advantage, since Grayson's rescue had involved a significant amount of manhandling.

Best of all, Grayson and you . . .

**fake_choice*

#Are still a couple. Gray comes by Nick's house every morning to drive me to Aeon.

#Now live together. Nick complains that our condo is a half-hour drive away, but he's secretly relieved that we're located out of his resting brainrange.

#Are engaged. I proposed to Grayson last year, after the cultist incident.

The engine of Gray's motorcycle rumbles up the driveway, and you grab your \${crimson} helmet from the foyer side table. Nick calls out to you from the kitchen just as you're about to leave.

"Mom and Dad are flying in this morning," he reminds you. "I'll pick them up from the airport and then head to the ceremony."

"I'm just glad that they were able to get away from the press storm," you say. Since the ~BIG REVEAL REDACTED SPOILERS~, your parents have been on diplomacy duty, in turns apologizing and defending Unity's decision to hide ~BIG SPOILERS~.

“Adsila wasn’t happy,” Nick concedes, “but Mom refused to miss this graduation.”

**fake_choice*

#“I understand wanting to make up for lost time, but she’s become a bit smothering.”

“She’s still trying to wrap her mind around the fact that her baby’s all grown up,” Nick says, stepping out into the hallway. “She’s a little overprotective right now, but she’ll get there.”

**if (Npartner)*

He grins ruefully. “I did.”

**elseif (Nprotector)*

He grins ruefully. “I will, too. Eventually.”

You roll your eyes. “I’m old enough to rent my own car now, you know.”

“But then your doting boyfriend would be deprived of your arms around him every morning,” Nick points out. “Speaking of said boyfriend, you should probably head out. Don’t want to be late on your last day.”

You pause at the threshold, then look back at your brother. Nick has been there for you through . . . well, through [i]everything[i]. Eight years ago, he stepped into the position of guardian when your parents were unable. He was your protector, advocate, and personal chef all rolled into one older brother.

Over these past four years, Nick’s role has changed: he’s both cheerleader and advisor, sibling and friend.

**if (Npartner)*

He’s also learned to let you go, supporting your choices instead of attempting to oversee them. Nick, as he is today, would never have been caught in Aeon’s explosion. He would trust you to succeed without his presence.

**if (Nprotector)*

He’s done his best to let you go and support your choices instead of trying to oversee them.

You’ll see Nick at the graduation ceremony, but the two of you may not have a chance to talk much.

**fake_choice*

#I rush towards my brother and wrap him in a tight hug.

#“I love you,” I say. Nick already knows, but sometimes it’s important to say it out loud.

#[i]Love you, \${Nicholas},[/i] I think at Nick.

#“I’m going to miss you once I move out,” I admit. “A little.”

Nick squeezes you back, treasuring the moment and quietly absorbing in all the feelings that your mind is undoubtedly blasting his way. Affection, gratitude, and an unconditional love that’s been tested only to emerge even stronger. You can’t hear Nick’s thoughts the way that he can yours, but you’re certain beyond doubt that everything which you feel towards your brother, he reciprocates ten-fold.

Nick pulls away first, his \${eyes} eyes glistening suspiciously. “Gray’s waiting,” he says roughly. “I’ll see you soon, \${Button}.”

“See you soon, \${Nicholas},” you reply.

**page_break*

Outside, Gray is leaning against his bike, his cellphone to his ear. Upon spotting you, his expression lights up. Every single morning, Grayson gives you that same doofy, eager smile, and every morning your heart warms at the sight.

“Change of plans,” he says. “You’re playing hooky from school.”

**fake_choice*

#I put a hand to my chest and gasp theatrically. “Grayson Black, are you encouraging me to be a delinquent?”

Gray rubs the back of his neck with a self-deprecating smile. “Not exactly,” he admits. “I informed Adsila that you’d be taking the morning off to have brunch with your parents.”

“My parents don’t fly in until eleven,” you remind him.

Grayson feigns shock. “Really?” he says. “You’ll have to make do with just me, then.”

“Oh my. Fortitude told a lie?” You stride towards Gray and run your hands up his chest, enjoying the way that his pupils dilate at the contact. You lean in close and whisper into his ear, “I always did appreciate a bad boy.”

**if (height = "tall") or (height = "very tall")*

Gray’s low groan reverberates beneath your splayed palms, and his mouth meets yours.

**else*

Gray’s low groan reverberates beneath your splayed palms, and his mouth descends upon yours.

The kiss is one born of both passion and familiarity, all the sweeter because of practiced expertise. Gray pulls you close, his hands on your waist so that you're pressed flush against his body. Your thoughts guide his motions, silently instructing him where to taste and where to touch. He responds to your every wish, whispering his own desires against your lips whenever you both pause to inhale.

You could spend the rest of your life kissing Grayson Black.

"The rest of our lives?" Gray murmurs. "I'd like that."

The sound of glass rattling breaks you apart, and you turn to see Nick pounding on the front window from within the house while sticking out his tongue with a grossed-out expression. Grayson flips your brother off, but the tips of his ears still pinken with embarrassment at being caught.

"Let's go," your boyfriend says. "I have something to show you."

[MB Short Story: Game Night's Downfall](#)

[Aug 2, 2023](#)

After three months, his invention was finally perfect.

Three months of intense emotional and physical labor. Of late nights and early mornings, and of two-minute breaks squeezed between downtime at work. Three months of sneaking out bits and bobs that he'd printed without permission on the 3d printer in the R&D lab. Three months of skipping lunch so he could similarly use Aeon's resources to take laser renderings of plastic figurines, transferring the scans to a thumb drive that he could take home.

In those three months, Taliaferro Parker had birthed a kingdom.

When he proudly declared as much (verbatim) to those assembled around Nick Wiseman's kitchen table, they stared at him skeptically.

"You did *what* with lab resources?" Ambrose Kim demanded.

Nick pouted. "What was wrong with the old map?"

"For one, it was doodled in crayon," Sally said.

"Well, excuse me for not having your art skills," Nick sniffed. "Origami isn't my forte; that pop-up inn took *hours* to fold."

"Was that the inn that Ellery's sorcerer burned down?" Grayson asked.

Nick nodded morosely, but Ellery only shrugged. "Bad roll on a wild magic surge," she justified. "Not my fault."

"See, this is why we banned you from playing a spellcaster this campaign," Sally told her.

Ellery smiled back ominously in a way that didn't bode well for the group surviving to Level Five. "I'm sure nothing similar will happen with my artificer."

Glitch cleared his throat, but no one heard him over their conversation.

"Maybe I should try a wizard this time," Gray mused. "Is it too late to alter my character sheet?"

"Parker, explain why you thought it was appropriate to use Unity's resources for a tabletop game?"

"Hold up. An artificer? Don't they make bombs?"

"Should've been Kim's class."

"You'd be a terrible wizard, Gray. Stick to being a paladin or cleric like always."

"Better a wizard than a barbarian. Remember last campaign?"

"He was too polite to rage."

"Unlike Kent. I did *not* anticipate him murdering half the party."

"It's always the quiet ones."

"It's unfair, is what it is! A druid isn't supposed to—"

Glitch looked pointedly at Kent, who nodded and raised two fingers to his lips. At his shrill, high whistle, the group fell silent.

"Thank you, Kenzie," Glitch said primly. "Now, if y'all would stop yammering and pay attention, I have something with which to awe and astound." He gently placed his invention—a black box of approximately two cubic feet—on the center of the oblong table.

"Assistant!" Glitch snapped his fingers in Kent's direction. "The lights, if you please."

Kent stood from the table and walked over to the kitchen light switch. Turning off the chandelier made zero difference, however, due to the late afternoon sun streaming in through the bay windows.

Glitch sighed. "Nick, do you mind closing the blinds?"

Once Nick had drawn the curtains, the room dimmed enough to discern a pale blue glow emanating from previously indiscernible seams along four of the box's six sides.

"Embark with me, my dearest friends," Glitch solemnly declared, "to a land of might, magic, and everything in between. To a fantasy where dryads defend their trees and where dragons debate philosophy. Where a party of unassuming adventurers has been summoned—"

"Has the game already started?" Sally asked Ellery in an overloud whisper.

Glitch scowled at her and raised his voice. "WHERE a party of unassuming adventures—"

"That's our characters, right?" Gray asked.

"Where-a-party-of-unassuming-adventures-has-been-summoned-by-the-Archmage-Groguthum-to-undertake-a-perilous-mission," Glitch quickly finished without taking a breath. He glared at Gray. "Yes, that party consists of your characters. Any other interruptions, or may I continue?"

"Sorry," Gray said, looking genuinely contrite.

Sally, on the other hand, snorted. "What's eating Gilbert Grape?" she asked Kent.

"It's Ferro's first time as a dungeon master," Kent replied calmly. "He's nervous."

"I'm not nervous!" Glitch huffed. "I'm annoyed because I put a lot of effort into this campaign." He slouched down in his chair and crossed his arms petulantly. "Whatever. *Odyssey, activate.*"

At his vocal command, the black box unfolded. Like a self-unwrapping birthday present, it flattened itself across the table. The glow brightened, projecting upwards to create towering trees and delicate spires with balconies filled with Lego-sized people that waved cheerily at the stunned humans situated around the table. Glitch had programed a virtual elven city, transformed it into a hologram, and fit it inside an automated box.

Sally squealed and pointed to a forested area at the bottom of the map, where six tiny, holographic figures sat around an equally tiny campfire. "Are those us?" She leaned in closer, eyes shining with curiosity and delight. "Oh my gosh, they are! Look at my little tiefling ranger! I'm sooo cute!"

"And so modest," Ellery teased. She glanced over at Glitch. "This is fantastic. How did you put all this together?"

Glitch waved a hand, brushing aside the compliment even as he beamed with pleasure. "Pshaw," he proudly proclaimed. "It was nothing."

"It's better than my crayon map," Nick conceded. "By far."

Ambrose frowned. "The use of technology is innovative, I admit. But using Unity resources for a hobby still falls outside of—"

“Ambrose?” Ellery said.

“Yes, dear?”

“Shut up and appreciate our friend’s hard work.”

Ambrose’s lips pursed together, although it looked as if he were biting back more words.

“That’s right, *Ambrose*,” Glitch teased. “Listen to your girlfriend. During game night, we’re *friends*.”

Ambrose opened his mouth to refute Glitch’s claim, only to remain silent at Ellery’s warning glare.

“Did you develop all this yourself?” Grayson asked, running his hand through one of the palace spires.

“It’s truly impressive.”

“Of course it’s impressive,” Glitch said, abandoning any pretense of modesty. “I designed it.”

“Cheers to the new Dungeon Master,” Nick said, raising his beer bottle. “I couldn’t be happier with my replacement.”

“To the new Dungeon Master!” everyone else around the table echoed, raising their own drinks. Even Ambrose, although not committing to the cheer aloud, took a small sip of his own hard cider.

“By the way,” Ellery commented after the toast. “Nick, this is your first reprieve from being DM, but you never told us what class you were playing.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Nick grinned at his sister wickedly. “I am, after all, incredibly charming. A master of seduction, whose handsome face and dulcet tones can convince even dragons to—”

“Shit,” Sally groaned. “He’s a bard.”

Kent let out a heavy sigh.

“Definitely a bard,” Grayson agreed with a sigh identical to Kent’s.

“God help us all,” Ambrose said grimly. “Shall we begin?”

[MB Saucy Side: Revenge is Pretty \(Featuring Grayson\)](#)

[Aug 30, 2023](#)

"It's custom, of course," Roland Black boasts, pointing proudly to the felted table that dominated his office (his desk having been shoved into the corner to make room for it). "Made by an Italian woodworker—Carozza, one of the artists whom Gray's mother showcased at the gallery. Engravings are the same as Blaire Hatt's, only his table is from the late Tudor era and too fragile to play on." Roland guffaws loudly. "I offered to buy the thing off Hatt—God knows that drafty estate of his could use a cash influx—but the old fool refused. Got myself a newer, better model. This one is heated, y'know, to help the balls roll faster."

You surreptitiously slide your hand into Gray's so that he can hear your thoughts: ***Your father sounds like the villain from a nineteenth-century Gothic novel***^{**}.^{**}

Your boyfriend's lips compress as he tries (and fails) to fend off a smile. "I was under the impression that Mum gifted you the table," he tells his father. "Her personal request to Carozza since he doesn't usually take such large commissions."

"Well, yes," Roland blusters, "but I personally selected all the details." He runs a wrinkled hand lovingly over the red felt before grabbing a cue stick from the rack.

Gray squeezes your hand. "Mum only bought it so that he'd stop harassing poor Mr. Hatt," he whispers as his father begins chalking a cue's tip.

You examine the table before noticing something odd: the table is completely flat, without any holes for the balls to go into. "Why are there no pockets?" you ask.

Roland's bushy brows fly upwards. "It's not a snooker table," he exclaims, aghast. "It's a traditional billiards table, an almost exact recreation of a model from the early sixteen-hundreds." He scoffs derisively. "*Pockets.*"

Your eyes eventually glaze over as Roland proceeds to bombard you with the history of billiards (the earliest recorded table belonged to King Louis XI) and how the game differs from pool and snooker. When you have the audacity to ask what 'snooker' is, his lecture evolves into a rant on American ignorance.

It makes for a very unpleasant afternoon, and you're not saved until Gray's mother comes to collect you all for dinner.

"Stop badgering them, Ro," Helene fondly chides, which causes her husband to grunt in protest but reluctantly obey. Helene's Bostonian accent is still prominent despite having moved to London over three decades ago (making you wonder how the two ever fell in love, given Roland's evident distaste for all things American).

Helene smiles as if reading your train of thought (she's not a Ment, however, which means her understanding is born out of natural insight). She hangs back to walk beside you.

“Ro’s still upset that Grayson moved away,” she explains in a quiet voice. “He hasn’t had a good thing to say about the States since.”

You smile at her. “I’m sure that we’ll find some common ground over dinner.”

* * * *

By the end of dinner, you’ve envisioned twenty-seven different ways to strangle Roland Black (your favorite being with his own bowtie). Gray, noticing how your agitation rises every time his father speaks, politely declines on both your behalf to remain for dessert under the excuse of “it’s been a long day, and we’re still dealing with jetlag.” This gives Roland an opportunity to complain that his son only suffers jetlag because he insisted on moving to that “filthy city” (Chicago).

Gray hastily escorts you to the rental car before you can act upon your increasingly violent urges.

“I apologize on my father’s behalf,” Gray says once back at your hotel. “He’s . . .”

Gray hesitates. No matter how horrible his father, your boyfriend usually tries to avoid complaining out of respect for his mother’s (historically futile) efforts to maintain peace between her husband and son.

“An asshole,” you bluntly fill-in. “Your dad is a huge asshole.”

Gray sighs, but a faint smirk twitches at the corner of his mouth. “My father can be difficult to get along with,” he concedes.

“Clarence from Aeon’s front desk is difficult,” you say. “Your dad is more of a Caligula.”

Gray’s smirk evolves into a reluctantly amused smile. “True. I’m sorry about his interrogation.”

“You tried to stop him.” You sit down on the hotel bed, patting the space beside you for Gray to sit. “But I now get why we’re not staying with your parents.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Gray says, “my mum is great.”

“She is great,” you agree. “Makes me wonder why she married your dad.”

“Yeah. He can be . . .”

“Difficult?”

“An arse,” Gray finally admits. “Mum promised that he’d be on his best behavior, otherwise I never would’ve exposed you.”

“We’ve been dating for two years. It was past time that I meet your parents.”

Gray groans. “I know. It’s just that I go in expecting the worst from my father, but then he somehow manages to surpass even those expectations. Complaining about the States is one thing, but those questions about kids? He all but implied—” Gray breaks off in a frustrated growl and sits next to you on the bed, burying his face in his hands.

“He implied that my mind blindness meant I wouldn’t be fit to parent.”

Roland hadn’t directly stated as much, but his belief had been clear: he didn’t consider you good enough for his son, let alone to be the parent of any future grandkids. How could you look after another human, he’d implied, when you need so much looking after yourself?

“You’d be a *great* parent,” Gray insists. He jolts upright, expression panicked. “I mean, in the future. If we want. Not now, obviously. We’re not even engaged yet.”

“Engaged yet?”

“Yet,” Gray repeats resolutely, despite the pinkening tips of his ears.

You lie down on the bed. Gray stretches beside you, wrapping his arm around your waist so that you can rest your head on his shoulder.

“Getting married sounds nice.” You yawn and snuggle closer to Gray. Your plane from Chicago landed this morning, and dealing with your future father-in-law has made an already long day of traveling feel positively tortuous.

“It sounds really nice,” Gray agrees. His yawn is even wider than yours, which causes you to yawn again.

Just need to make sure of one thing first*.* You think the words at Gray, too tired to continue talking aloud.

“Hmm?” Gray mumbles, already half-asleep.

Do we need to invite your father to the wedding?

“Hells, no.” Gray’s arm around you tightens. “He’d probably refuse to attend a wedding in the States, anyway.”

* * * *

The next morning, you and Gray stop by his parents’ house for breakfast only to find a note taped to the front door: “Art Emergency – Gone to Gallery. Breakfast in Fridge.”

“What exactly qualifies as an ‘art emergency’?” you ask.

Gray shrugs. "Probably some problem involving framing at the gallery that Mum runs." He glances over at you with a sly expression. "It's hard to keep children from touching the paintings."

You groan. "I was eight." The worst part about having a boyfriend capable of reading your mind was that he knows all your embarrassing childhood stories.

"Old enough to know better," Gray says.

"Just don't tell your mom about my art vandal past," you reply. "I want her to like me."

Gray kisses the top of your head. "She loves you."

You step into the house, headed towards the kitchen. "Your father isn't here, either," you note in relief.

"He always tags along for Mum's emergencies," Gray says. "Growls at people when she points, threatens to call contacts that blocked his number years ago. That sort of thing."

You snicker. "It's surprising. When it comes to Helene, Roland acts so . . ."

"Biddable?" Gray suggests.

You nod, and he chuckles.

"Believe it or not, retirement has turned my father into a veritable kitten," he says. A shadow falls over Gray's eyes. "Comparatively, at least. He was a controlling tyrant back when I was in school; I never understood what my mother saw in him."

"You're saying that Roland used to be *worse*?"

"Infinitely," Gray confirms. "He's better now, but even so . . ." He heaves a sigh. "Even so, I feel guilty for exposing you to him."

You place your hand on Gray's shoulder, letting him hear your inner thoughts and feelings: your understanding that Gray wants to remain close with his mother, along with your hurt over Roland casting doubt upon both your suitability as Gray's partner and your potential future as a parent. When Gray had angrily called out his father during last night's dinner, Roland had simply proclaimed that he was only asking "innocent questions."

Gray flattens his hand atop of yours. "I'm sorry. Say the word, and we won't see him again this trip."

"I'll tolerate your dad for Helene's sake," you reply, "but I want revenge."

"What did you have in mind?" Gray asks.

Your lips curve into a devilish smile as you imagine the scene for his benefit. Seeing what you intend, Gray's entire body goes still as if electrified. Without another word, he grabs your hand and leads the

way into his father's study.

* * * *

It's not easy to balance two adult bodies atop a billiards table, even one as sturdy and expensive as Roland's. Neither you nor Gray are too concerned about stability, however, nor comfort for that matter. Your only concern is getting as close to Grayson as possible, kissing him so deeply until you both forget how to breathe—or snogging so deeply, to use the dialect of Gray's people.

Despite your initial proposal of “let's have sex on your dad's pool table in order to get back at the bastard,” all thoughts of Roland immediately flee your mind the moment that Gray pulls off his shirt. Golden hair dusts across his firm chest, its pattern narrowing at his naval and leading intriguingly down below the hem of his jeans. You push him onto his back, then straddle his chest, admiring the way that the table's eight-foot length frames your boyfriend's body.

Splayed across the red felt, gazing adoringly up at you, Grayson Black is the prettiest picture ever.

The corner of Gray's mouth quirks upward in amusement. “I'm not sure how I feel about being called pretty,” he says, wrapping his large hands around your waist and adjusting your position.

“Don't worry, you're still ruggedly handsome and oh-so manly,” you tease, pressing yourself against his chest. His breath hitches as your head falls to his shoulder and you whisper, lips caressing his ear, “But you're also very, very *pretty*.”

Gray lets out a low, pained groan at your declaration. He grabs the back of your head, his kiss is fevered and desperate, and his tongue insistently finding yours as if to steal the word ‘pretty’ right off it . . . but you don't need your tongue to talk.

You're pretty*,* you think as Gray deepens the kiss. ***Gorgeous, beautiful, stunning.***

Gray's chest rumbles with laughter beneath you. “It's unfair that you get to compliment me while we're kissing,” he gasps against your lips, “whereas I have to stop kissing you to—”

You silence him with another kiss. ***Keep trying***, you encourage. ***Someday, maybe I'll be able to hear you back.***

Gray murmurs something against your lips—probably something along the lines of “I hope so” or “I'll keep trying.” You don't particularly care what he's attempting to say, because you already know his heart: Grayson thinks that you're pretty, too. More than pretty. The unequal footing between you two still frustrates him at times, however, which is why his long-term goal has been to learn to project his thoughts to you (not an easy feat for a non-telepath).

Grayson's short-term goal? That would just be you.

The billiard table creaks in protest as Grayson flips positions so that you're flush against the felt and he's balanced over you. Soon, it doesn't matter who can read whose mind; neither you nor Gray are capable of cohesive thought.

[Delivery for the Damned: Luce \(Male Version\)](#)

[Aug 30, 2023](#)

1538

"Why are you here, Lucien?" Idesbald, Right Reverend Abbot of Waulsort Abbey, spoke in slow French for the sake of the boy standing before him.

Lucien lowered his head, clear blue eyes pinned on the Abbot's slippers as if the elaborate beading could somehow enlighten him as to the right words. "God guided me to this monastery, Father Abbot," he said softly. "I only obeyed his will."

Idesbald suppressed a small sigh. Nervous as a fieldmouse, this child, and a liar to boot. "Look at me, Brother Lucien."

Lucien's head shot up, his expression brightening with the Abbot's usage of 'Brother.' "Have you decided to let me stay, then?" he asked. "Pepe—that is, Brother Pierre—said that I was bright. He's been teaching me to read music." Lucien smiled dreamily. "I never knew that music could be written down. Notation is a lot easier to read than Latin."

And there, Idesbald determined, was the crux of the issue. The boy wasn't meant to be a monk, at least not yet. From the moment that Idesbald had first discovered the urchin two years ago, curled asleep beneath the chapel organ, he'd known that Lucien was meant to glorify God's majesty through music.

Well, perhaps Idesbald hadn't known *immediately*. Despite a lifetime spent serving The Church, first as a priest and then as abbot, Idesbald had somehow managed to retain his natural humility; he was no saint to whom the Lord would ever speak directly (nor would he pretend otherwise, unlike those twats in Rome). Idesbald allowed Lucien to stay at the monastery out of empathy—it was only a year later, when he'd heard the child singing while cleaning the kitchens, that Idesbald realized that he'd foolishly overlooked God's very obvious sign regarding Lucien's divine calling. San Pancrazio's Cardinal had taken his sweet time responding to Idesbald letter, but Carafa's reply had finally arrived yesterday.

Lucien's fate was preordained, provided the boy didn't prove stubborn.

"How old are you?" Idesbald asked.

"I believe that I'm twelve, Father Abbot."

"You're yet a child and already so certain that here is where you belong?"

Lucien's throat tightened at the question. Was he about to be ejected from the Abbey? Leaving Waulsort meant leaving Brother Pierre's lessons. He'd miss those even more than regular meals and his thin straw pallet in the kitchen. "Here is the only place that I have, Father Abbot."

"Don't be so certain." Idesbald held out an unsealed envelope, which Lucien took with shaking hands.

The boy's face scrunched in confusion.

"Can you read it?" Idesbald asked.

"The writer wants me to come to Rome?" Lucien sounded uncertain. "Why?"

"To train as a chorister," Idesbald explained. "You'll be singing, Lucien. Not only the works of others, but those works that God inspires within *you*. Like the hymn which you sing while working in the kitchen."

Although Idesbald had intended to be reassuring, Lucien's face paled in terror. "Father Abbot," he whispered in a strangled voice, "are they going to chop off my—"

"No!" Idesbald interjected. "Your voice has already changed."

Lucien's shoulders slumped with visible relief, but his frown lingered. "Can't I just continue to learn from Pepe?"

"Brother Pierre is a scholar, not a musician," Idesbald replied. "God has gifted you a wonderful talent, Lucien. It is your duty not to squander it."

"I don't want to squander anything," Lucien agreed, "but leaving here is—"

"Your fate," Idesbald finished sternly. "You were sent to me for a reason, Lucien. If it is God's will, then one day you will return." His voice softened. "I recognize that this must be frightening. You'll be an outsider, and many in Rome will be reluctant to accept you. My recommendation only ushers you through the door; God must guide you through the rest."

Something behind Lucien's eyes shifted, the shadows of anxiety lightening to determination. "I'll learn music?"

"You will learn music," Idesbald confirmed, "and create songs which reflect His Glory."

"Then I'll go."

* * * *

2018

"Why are you here, Lucien?" Idesbald, former Right Reverend Abbot of Waulsort Abbey, took a long, final draw of his cigar before snuffing it out on a nearby ashtray. Without taking his eyes off Luce, he stood from the chaise where he'd been reclining and walked over to the bar. The nightclub (which Idesbald had named, in a private joke, *Inquisition*) had closed twenty minutes ago at four am, and the staff had all gone home. Idesbald, however, had the key to unlock the wine shelf, where he kept a bottle of 1981 Karuizawa whiskey hidden (the perks of being club owner).

Luce shrugged as he accepted the glass of whiskey from Idesbald. He sat down in the seat that Idesbald had recently vacated, leaving Idesbald to remain standing. Idesbald didn't mind—at least this way, he could pretend that he was still taller than the ungrateful brat.

"Why do I do anything?" Luce asked, his Southern drawl making the statement sound even more sarcastic.

"Because you're bored," Idesbald surmised, "or unhappy." He took a sip of his own whiskey, savoring its slow burn down his throat. No matter how long he lived, good alcohol would always be preferable to . . . other beverages.

"Maybe I'm both," Luce said glibly. "Or maybe I missed you, Dad."

Idesbald didn't react to the nickname. Luce had been bitterly calling him variations of "Father" for centuries now, and it always sounded like an insult.

"Or you heard about my plans," Idesbald said.

"Or I heard about your plans," Luce echoed. He slammed his glass down on the table and glared at Idesbald. "What the fuck were you thinking, inviting me to something like this?"

Idesbald closed his eyes. "I'm tired," he said. "It's time."

"Bullshit. Law says that you still have another forty years before your Sunrise."

"I don't *want* another forty years," Idesbald snapped.

He opened his eyes to find Luce staring at him with a complicated expression. There was anger, of course, Idesbald deserved that. But Luce also looked lost, and so very, painfully, young . . . even though Luce had been almost thirty at the time of his Death. Perhaps it was the pink hair that made Luce appear so youthful, or perhaps it was because Luce had recently fed.

Idesbald hoped the reason wasn't the latter. He was rather fond of his staff.

He took another swallow of whiskey. "Two weeks ago, I buried my youngest grandchild," he said. "She was eighty-two."

"My condolences," Luce said stiffly. "Losing people never gets easier, but that's no reason to give up everything else."

"You're wrong," Idesbald said. "It was easier, this time. That's the goddamn problem. I used to dress up as Santa for that kid every Christmas, yet I felt only numbness at her death." He polished off his whiskey and began immediately refilling the glass. "It's my time, Luce. Earlier than I expected, but it's time."

Luce didn't answer, a conflicted series of emotions progressing over his features: pity, anger, condemnation, sorrow, and finally acceptance.

"That answers why I'm here, then," Luce said.

[MB Saucy Side: The Promise of Tahiti \(Ferro Version\)](#)

[Sep 30, 2023](#)

The weather outside is frightful, but there is nothing delightful about the fireplace which refuses to fulfill its lyrical obligation. Instead of basking you in cozy warmth, the flames sputter weakly and filled the small cabin with smoke that burns your throat and nasal passageways.

Ferro stares helplessly down at the poker in his hand. "I think," he says slowly, "that the chimney might be clogged."

"Gee, what gave it away?"

Ferro winces at your heavy sarcasm, but you find it difficult to care about your boyfriend's feelings when acrid fumes sting your eyes and make it increasingly difficult to breathe. **This** is why you suggested vacationing in Tahiti over summer break, but Ferro had his heart set on skiing—never mind the fact that neither of you know how to ski.

"We'll learn!" he'd cheerfully claimed. "Babe, trust me. This cottage I rented is like something out a fairytale."

"You already rented the cottage?" you'd asked taken aback.

"Trust me," Ferro had repeated.

Lovestruck fool that you are, you trusted him. And now you're both going to die. In New Zealand, to further the indignity of it all. Who on earth dies on a ski trip to *New Zealand*?

Of course, Ferro was never all that interested in skiing, which is why he reserved the first place he'd found online. Skiing was just the bait to convince you to come with him, a cherry on top of a two-week Lord of the Rings tour (that Ferro conveniently hadn't mentioned, knowing that you'd sworn to never again go on a themed tour with him after the Star Trek debacle).

Granted, the tour had been fun. You might never be able to read Tolkien ever again, having reached your maximum tolerance for elven lore, but you did take some adorable photos of Ferro fanboying in the Fangorn Forrest. Should you both survive this, maybe you'll start scrapbooking.

Ferro's hoarse cough brings you back into the present, to the matter of the clogged chimney and your imminent demise.

The iron vent creaks as you close it, smothering the already dying flames to ash. You and Ferro both stare grimly at the extinguished fire.

"Maybe we can check into the resort?" you suggest.

Ferro shakes his head. "Radio said that roads are closed due to the storm."

"So, no chance of getting someone out to fix the breaker then."

"If the breaker were fixable, I'd do it myself," Ferro says. "The wiring needs to be replaced."

Fantastic. Being without electricity as one thing, but now even humanity's most primitive heat source has failed. It feels like a personal affront by Prometheus himself: you can either spend the night freezing your ass off or asphyxiate from smoke inhalation.

You groan. If only Ferro's puppy eyes weren't so damn irresistible, you'd be in Tahiti right now.

"Maybe it's not that bad," Ferro says. "We'll be like that fanfiction trope." His voice lowers to a husky whisper: "Two strangers, forced by winter's chill to seek refuge in an abandoned cottage, must cling to each other for warmth in order to survive. By the end of a steamy night, they're lovers."

"Except this rental cottage cost us seven-hundred dollars a night," you point out, "and we're already lovers."

Ferro smirks. "I'm not opposed to roleplaying."

That fact, you already knew. The Lord of the Rings tour left Ferro feeling . . . *inspired*.

"Maybe," you concede.

* * * *

Fanfiction tropes, you and Ferro quickly realize, are bullshit.

There's nothing sexy about a being burrito-ed with someone else by musty blanket inside a freezing, smoggy cabin. Initial attempts at nudity are immediately discarded; clothing is kept on, and several layers added out of necessity. Instead of skin touching skin, the polyester of your winter jackets rub sensuously against each other.

Even handholding is impossible given that both you and Ferro opt to wear mittens instead of risking frostbite.

Unable to sleep, you stare at the fluffy cottonball at the top of Ferro's knit hat. Pale moonlight illuminates your breath, and a frigid breeze blows in through the open window (necessary to let the smoke out so that you and Ferro both don't die).

"Next time, we go to Tahiti," you inform Ferro.

He chuckles. "We'd certainly be wearing less clothing."

You place your mittened hand upon his upper thigh, a teasing gesture which he doesn't seem to feel through his snow pants.

"If we were in Tahiti, we'd be on a private beach," you say, closing your eyes to imagine the scene. "One with white sands, secluded by palm trees."

"Where no one could see us misbehave?" Ferro says, and you can hear the smile in his voice without opening your eyes. "I'd take your hand and walk us into the water."

"The *warm* water," you insist through chattering teeth.

"So warm it's practically a jacuzzi," Ferro promises. "We'd wade out until the water was waist high." He pauses. "We're not wearing bathing suits in this scenario, right?"

"Definitely no bathing suits," you confirm.

"The water would be so clear that I'd still see your legs beneath the waves. I'd cusp my hands and fill them with water, only to open my fingers and let it cascade over your shoulders and chest like a waterfall." His breath quickens, and he nuzzles your neck (or rather, your scarf, which is decidedly less erotic). "I'd give anything to see all of you under the sun," he murmurs. "Water droplets glistening on your skin, nipples tightening in the salty ocean breeze."

You frown. "No tightening nipples," you chide. "I don't want to be cold in Tahiti as well."

"You're only nippy in Tahiti because you're turned on," Ferro counters.

"Well, I won't stay that way if you keep using the word 'nippy'."

"Then I'd use my hands," Ferro says. "My tongue. Other parts of me." Despite the ski mask covering his features, you can tell that he's wagging his eyebrows.

"I don't know," you tease. "Aragorn and I are kinda hot and heavy right now."

Ferro kisses you through the layers of protective fabric. It's not sexy or steamy or electric or any of the adjectives usually used to describe physical intimacy. Instead, his kiss is a promise: that he'll love you no matter how many layers of clothing between, regardless of weather or location. To him, you're irresistible whether flaunting your nudity on an imaginary beach in Tahiti or wrapped within a blanket cocoon in an unfortunately real, run-down cabin.

One thing, however, is certain:

Next time, you'll pick the vacation.

[MB Saucy Side: The Promise of Tahiti \(Talia Version\)](#)

[Sep 30, 2023](#)

The weather outside is frightful, but there is nothing delightful about the fireplace which refuses to fulfill its lyrical obligation. Instead of basking you in cozy warmth, the flames sputter weakly and filled the small cabin with smoke that burns your throat and nasal passageways.

Talia stares helplessly down at the poker in her hand. "I think," she says slowly, "that the chimney might be clogged."

"Gee, what gave it away?"

Talia winces at your heavy sarcasm, but you find it difficult to care about your girlfriend's feelings when acrid fumes sting your eyes and make it increasingly difficult to breathe. **This** is why you suggested vacationing in Tahiti over summer break, but Talia had her heart set on skiing—never mind the fact that neither of you know how to ski.

"We'll learn!" she'd cheerfully claimed. "Babe, trust me. This cottage I rented is like something out of a fairytale."

"You already rented the cottage?" you'd asked taken aback.

"Trust me," Talia had repeated.

Lovestruck fool that you are, you trusted her. And now you're both going to die. In New Zealand, to further the indignity of it all. Who on earth dies on a ski trip to *New Zealand*?

Of course, Talia was never all that interested in skiing, which is why she reserved the first place she'd found online. Skiing was just the bait to convince you to come on this trip, a cherry on top of a two-week Lord of the Rings tour (which Talia conveniently hadn't mentioned, knowing that you'd sworn to never again go on a themed tour with her after the Star Trek debacle).

Granted, the tour had been fun. You might never be able to read Tolkien ever again, having reached your maximum tolerance for elven lore, but you did take some adorable photos of Talia fangirling in the Fangorn Forrest. Should you both survive this, maybe you'll start scrapbooking.

Talia's hoarse cough brings you back into the present, to the matter of the clogged chimney and your imminent demise.

The iron vent creaks as you close it, smothering the already dying flames to ash. You and Talia both stare grimly at the extinguished fire.

"Maybe we can check into the resort?" you suggest.

Talia shakes her head. "Radio said that roads are closed due to the storm."

"So, no chance of getting someone out to fix the breaker then."

"If the breaker were fixable, I'd do it myself," Talia says. "The wiring needs to be replaced."

Fantastic. Being without electricity as one thing, but now even humanity's most primitive heat source has failed. It feels like a personal affront by Prometheus himself: you can either spend the night freezing your ass off or asphyxiate from smoke inhalation.

You groan. If only Talia's puppy eyes weren't so damn irresistible, you'd be in Tahiti right now.

"Maybe it's not that bad," Talia says. "We'll be like that fanfiction trope." Her voice lowers to a husky whisper: "Two strangers, forced by winter's chill to seek refuge in an abandoned cottage, must cling to each other for warmth in order to survive. By the end of a steamy night, they're lovers."

"Except this rental cottage cost us seven-hundred dollars a night," you point out, "and we're already lovers."

Talia smirks. "I'm not opposed to roleplaying."

That fact, you already knew. The Lord of the Rings tour left Talia feeling . . . *inspired*.

"Maybe," you concede.

* * * *

Fanfiction tropes, you and Talia quickly realize, are bullshit.

There's nothing sexy about a being burrito-ed with someone else by musty blanket inside a freezing, smoggy cabin. Initial attempts at nudity are immediately discarded; clothing is kept on, and several layers added out of necessity. Instead of skin touching skin, the polyester of your winter jackets rub sensuously against each other.

Even handholding is impossible given that both you and Talia opt to wear mittens instead of risking frostbite.

Unable to sleep, you stare at the fluffy cottonball at the top of Talia's knit hat. Pale moonlight illuminates your breath, and a frigid breeze blows in through the open window (necessary to let the smoke out so that you and Talia both don't die).

"Next time, we go to Tahiti," you inform Talia.

She chuckles. "We'd certainly be wearing less clothing."

You place your mittened hand upon her upper thigh, a teasing gesture which she doesn't seem to feel through her snow pants.

"If we were in Tahiti, we'd be on a private beach," you say, closing your eyes to imagine the scene. "One with white sands, secluded by palm trees."

"Where no one could see us misbehave?" Talia says, and you can hear the smile in her voice without opening your eyes. "I'd take your hand and walk us into the water."

"The *warm* water," you insist through chattering teeth.

"So warm it's practically a jacuzzi," Talia promises. "We'd wade out until the water was waist high." She pauses. "We're not wearing bathing suits in this scenario, right?"

"Definitely no bathing suits," you confirm.

"The water would be so clear that I'd still see your legs beneath the waves. I'd cusp my hands and fill them with water, only to open my fingers and let it cascade over your shoulders and chest like a waterfall." Her breath quickens, and she nuzzles your neck (or rather, your scarf, which is decidedly less erotic). "I'd give anything to see all of you under the sun," she murmurs. "Water droplets glistening on your skin, nipples tightening in the salty ocean breeze."

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"You're only nippy in Tahiti because you're turned on," Talia counters.

"Well, I won't stay that way if you keep using the word 'nippy'."

"Then I'd use my hands," Talia says. "My tongue. Other parts of me." Despite the ski mask covering her features, you can tell that she's wagging her eyebrows.

"I don't know," you tease. "Arwen and I are kinda hot and heavy right now."

Talia kisses you through the layers of protective fabric. It's not sexy or steamy or electric or any of the adjectives usually used to describe physical intimacy. Instead, her kiss is a promise: that she'll love you no matter how many layers of clothing between, regardless of weather or location. To her, you're irresistible whether flaunting your nudity on an imaginary beach in Tahiti or wrapped within a blanket cocoon in an unfortunately real, run-down cabin.

One thing, however, is certain:

Next time, you'll pick the vacation.

[Demo Update Tomorrow!](#)

[Sep 30, 2023](#)

It's real! It's happening! It's releasing tomorrow!

Drumroll

It's the Vengeance Ending! Which is way overdue, but finally fully cooked.

Also releasing tomorrow is the second half of Chapter 15, which happens if you reject Shard (instead of Chapter 15's heist, Button instead gets put in an interrogation room with either Isaiah or Caleb. The different interrogation scenes alone are over 80 pages of text on Microsoft Word, so y'all have a lot of reading ahead.)

Double Also: *Mind Blind* is finished. Finished-finished. As in, the only scenes left for me to write are the ones that I accidentally skipped over and that I'm still discovering during my many (God, so many) replays. No more major changes, though. No more last-minute-plot-ideas-turned-two-weeks-worth-of-labor alterations. (It's still a lot of words, though, so please be patient. Truthfully, I should've released *Mind Blind* as two separate books.)

Triple Also: the 2nd and 3rd ending branches will be out in Oct/November, with December for beta trial. Because I simply do not have it in me to keep editing things until the new year. I am edited out.

Quadruple Also: I want to apologize for being such a noncommunicative hermit during this final push. I've been open with the fact that *Mind Blind* is partially inspired by my past agoraphobia, and while I'm not relapsing (I go outside! . . . Sometimes!), I've been dealing with some social media-induced panic attacks, made worse by the fact that while I'm great at beginning stories, endings have never been easy

for me. There's no more painful phrase in the English language for me to internally process than the words 'good enough'. I'm staying with my mom for moral support until *Mind Blind* gets submitted to Hosted Games, though, so things are looking up!

(Bonus Update: my mom is currently training to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Suck it, cancer.)

Things to know in advance about the Vengeance Ending:

-Whereas most of Mind Blind's endings have a total of 18 Chapters plus an epilogue (with the exception of one route that has 19 chapters), the Vengeance-allied path only has 17 chapters. It originally had 18 chapters, with the other endings having 19 or 20, but I've spent most this month condensing Chapters 16-20 for a tighter narrative with less repetitive scenes on the different branches. For perspective, Chapters 16-19 have *more* files (and thus, completely unique scenes versus minor variations) than do Chapters 1 - 15 combined.

-Unlike that Death Cab For Cutie song, none of the ROs will follow you into the dark during the Vengeance ending. You can, however, get some smexy star-crossed lover vibes. Or a kissable minion, should Button play their cards right.

-Shard's identity is NOT revealed in the main Vengeance story pathway, because Shard has too much self-preservation to go near Vengeance Buttons. (There is, however, a different opportunity to align with Vengeance in Main Branch #3 should certain plot reveals break your Button and make them turn evil. Shard also shows up in Vengeance's unique epilogue, provided Button picks up a certain amount of clues.)

-Regular requirements for joining Vengeance rely on two hidden stats: your Vengeance score must over 80 (which you raise by agreeing with Vengeance's philosophy), and your Unity score under 50 (which you lower by criticizing Unity). However, you can lessen this requirement if your Resentment Stat is over 98, because who needs politics when Button has RAGE. In this case, the only other requirement is that your Vengeance stat be above 50.

For tomorrow's demo update, these requirements won't be in place. Everyone, regardless of their stats, will be able to ally with Vengeance, but characters will all treat your Button as if they've always behaved like Anakin Skywalker.

[Sneak Peek Before Tomorrow](#)

[Sep 30, 2023](#)

Look, I know that I need to go to bed now. It's past 1am.

But I'm excited and adrenaline-fueled regarding tomorrow's demo update, and if my contacts weren't glued to my eyeballs and turning my vision all blurry then I'd power through the final bug quashes right now to release earlier.

Anyway, here's a teeny glimpse at my personal favorite Chapter 15 interrogation variation, which many of you may not see since the option only happens if your relationship with Sally is over 95 or you've failed to maintain your cover with Vengeance (and are not romancing Grayson, because reasons).

Interrogation Variation #13

"Why did you join Unity, Sally?" Isaiah asks, confirming that he recognizes her despite fifteen years having passed since they last met.

Sally glances at you, her expression oddly guilty. "Mr. Izzy, where's Nick?" she deflects.

"You promised me, Sally."

"Yeah, well, you promised [i]me[/i] not to join a terrorist cell."

"I did not."

"It was implied!" Sally cries out. "For God's sake, it was implied! You can't preach one thing and then do the complete opposite because you think that our rules don't apply to you! You're not wiser than me. You're not smart, not clever, you're just a . . . a . . ." She falters, struggling for the right word.

"A hypocrite?" Isaiah suggests with a self-deprecating smile.

"An idiot," Sally corrects. "You're a goddamn idiot, Mr. Izzy. If your vision was that dire, you should've warned Unity."

"Sally, are you implying that Isaiah saw something?" you ask.

Sally rolls her eyes, her annoyance more targeted towards Isaiah's evident stupidity than your cluelessness. "Why else would the old fool join Vengeance?" she demands. "He obviously had a scary vision regarding the future and decided to play God to make sure that it never happened. Even though [i]he's the one who taught me that it doesn't work that way.[/i]" Her voice hitches and eyes glisten with unshed tears.

"It never works that way, Isaiah," she whispers. "You know that it never works."

"Then why did you enroll in Aeon?" Isaiah asks.

Sally averts her eyes, refusing to answer his question, and Isaiah nods as if he's just won their argument.

"I had to try, Sally," he says. "You more than anyone know that I had to try."

[Mind Blind Demo Update: Vengeance Ending Link](#)

[Oct 1, 2023](#)

At this moment, Caleb in Chapter 15 is somehow breaking Chapter 16, but I still wanted to get the link up so everyone subscribed for September has access to this update. I'm working to solve this problem tonight and will add the Chapter 16 and 17 to the link (see bottom of post) as soon as they're playable via Caleb's interrogation pathway. (Should be an hour or so unless another problem pops up. In event of my failure, I'll upload the file onto the Sanctum discord and see if any of you guys can spot the issue.)

That being said, even this little bit is still a 30,000 word update. (Because have I mentioned that Chapter 15 alone is over 150,000 words? Some of it is overlap, granted, but I still hate myself for having too many dang variations.)

To play the new material, simply reject Shard's offer in Chapter 14 (or try to mentally fight them so that Button passes out). Isaiah's interrogation route will play out normally provided you've witnessed his prophecy, but Caleb's branch will terminate abruptly since I just uploaded half that file while I figure out why Caleb having a black eye is somehow breaking all of Andy/Liz's interactions.

Everyone's save files from Chapter 13 or earlier should still work. If you play through the heist in Chapter 15, you can just save at the end and will be able to immediately go onto Chapters 16 and 17 once I fix things. If you play through the interrogation pathway, however, you'll need to keep a save from Chapter 14 (or earlier) in order to progress.

Mini-scenes to search for while waiting for this update's update:

- Sally talking about Nick being her potential murderer
- Consequences from giving AL that usb drive (for code divers, the label is literally "yupyourfault", because Button should feel guilty about this decision)
- Isaiah making Rosy squirm
- Glitch making Rosy squirm
- Glitch making Isaiah squirm
- Rosy making Glitch squirm

-Insightful Button being an obnoxious Know-It-All

-High-Effort Button sexually propositioning an 80-year-old

DEMO LINK: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/calebisbeingabitch/mygame/>

[Chapter 16V and 16K, Now Up](#)

[Oct 30, 2023](#)

(Scroll to bottom for demo link. It's the same as before even though Caleb is now guiltless. Sorry, Caleb.)

(I also apologize to Juliette, for entirely different reasons.)

(Also, I updated the wrong file earlier for Chapter 16V. The correct version is up now, complete with the reason that I needed to apologize to Juliette. If you haven't encountered Juliette, consider replaying Chapter 10 as Chapter 16V assumes that she and Button have met.)

If you've attempted to play the demo over the past few weeks, you've probably had it break for you at various chapters. (Or maybe you've lucked out and been able to play Caleb's Chapter 15 interview path.) I've been updating the files constantly changing things, but the frequent updating probably only served to reset your saves. Sorry! Really, at this point I should just stop setting timelines since everything always turns out to be way more broken than I anticipated.

Good news: The bugs in Chapters 4, 6, and 9-14 are all fixed! There were a lot of issues, most created due to yours truly inserting in new variables for the endings. The Vengeance Ending also turned out to make zero sense unless you made certain choices (a dumb oversight on my part), so new dialogue has been added throughout *Mind Blind* so that all players can properly follow the plot even if not romancing Kenzie (who features heavily in the Vengeance ending because reasons).

More Good News: Chapters 16 fully is added for both the Vengeance ending *and* the follow Kenzie-down-the-passageway ending (aka Chapters 16V and 16K). I had wanted to add Chapter 17 (17V) of the Vengeance ending before posting this update, but life proved uncooperative. In the process editing, Chapter 17V had enough material added that the Vengeance ending now has 18 total chapters instead of just 17. Instead, I added Chapter 16K to the demo, which is one of three main Chapter 16 versions that you can achieve depending on your choices (this chapter was closest to the original version, so it had less issues to iron out than Chapter 16H).

One option in Chapter 16 is also blocked off should you follow Kenzie down the tunnel, however, because it bypasses scenes and jumps you from file Chapter 16K to 16V2.

If this all sounds confusing, that's because that it *is* confusing. Confusion has been my default state this past month, but all of *Mind Blind*'s endings are now neatly organized into labeled files. Huzzah! Chapters 17 and 18Vs (the Vengeance path files) will be out as soon as they're completely playable.

Sorry if this post is difficult to follow. Basically, there are a lot of files, because there are a lot of endings (and this after I edited them to heck and back so that there weren't any repeat scenes). Each file contains about around three to six flavors of a main ending path.

For those curious, I've listed all of unposted files below in order of my estimated timeline for Patreon release. Once these are up, *Mind Blind* is officially donezo and ready for submission. Obviously, you won't ever play all of these endings in a single run. Your actual playthrough will be something like *Chapter 16V, 16K2, 17R, 18R, 19R* (for example).

Anyway, here's the list:

Just Released:

Chapter 16K (Chapter 16, if Button chooses to follow Kenzie) – **released**

Chapter16V (Chapter 16, if Button chooses to join Vengeance) – **released**

Releasing as Soon as I Finish Fixing Stuff:

Chapter 16V2 (Chapter 16, the Vengeance path but not really)

Chapter 17V (Chapter 17, Vengeance Route continued)

Chapter 17V2 (Button fails the Vengeance route in Chapter 16V, already partially in demo, basically the second half of 16K except all your coworkers hate you now. Except Sally because she takes that last F of BFFs very seriously.)

Chapter 18V1 (Chapter 18, Conclusion #1 to the Vengeance Route)

Chapter 18V2 (Chapter 18, Conclusion #2 to the Vengeance Route)

Vengeance Epilogues 1, 2, and 3 (Varies depending on your main henchperson. I think I already spoiled all of the options on Sanctum discord, but Caleb is potential goon and I love him despite the current demo link title.)

Releasing November:

Chapter 16V2 (Chapter 16, the Vengeance ending but Not Really)

Chapter 16H (Chapter 16, if Button runs back to the van)

Chapter 17R (Chapter 17, should Button decide to pursue Reese)

Chapter 18R (Chapter 18, Reese's path)

Chapter 18V (Chapter 18, Reese's path but evil)

Chapter 19R1 (Chapter 19, Reese's path, Conclusion #1)

Chapter 19R2 (Chapter 19, Reese's path, Conclusion #2)

Releasing December:

Chapter 17N (Chapter 17, should Button choose to rescue Nick)

Chapter 18N1 (Chapter 18, Nick's path, Route #1)

Chapter 18N2 (Chapter 18, Nick's path, Route #2)

Chapter 18N2 (Chapter 18, Nick's path, Route #3)

Chapter 19N1 (Chapter 19, Nick's path, Conclusion #1)

Chapter 19N2 (Chapter 19, Nick's path, Conclusion #2)

Chapter 19N3 (Chapter 19, Nick's path, Conclusion #3)

Chapter 19N4 (Chapter 19, Nick's path, Conclusion #4)

Chapter 20 (Possible conclusion for Chapter 19N1)

Releasing ???

Rest of the Epilogues (Too many epilogues to list individually. I don't know why I did this to myself except that I am an absolute sucker for feel-good fluff at the end of a story.)

For the record, each of the chapter files averages around 45,000-50,000 words (this after undergoing extreme editing to reduce duplicate scenes and make the files more manageable). First drafts are all written and coded, and the *R* Chapters (representing the route where Button takes down Vengeance) are mostly playable with just a few missing scenes that I need to rewrite.

(I'll be real, though, the *N* chapters are a tangled cluster duck. Feathers everywhere.)

The bad news: In order to not run into issues while playing the Vengeance ending, you'll need to restart from Chapter One. Former save files *might* work but things will likely be wonky. Even if it works, old

saves will DEFINITELY break once the other ending branches starting in Chapter 15 are added. This should be the last time a save file reset happens, so any new save made in Chapter 14 should work for all future endings. (Take this statement as an expression of my hopes, however, with several dozen grains of salt. I've heralded the end of save file breakage before, and I was a dirty rotten liar).

Finally, the Vengeance ending usually has requirements that have been taken out for the purpose of the demo. Your MC's internal dialogue will likely feel out of character unless you're playing an evil-maniacal Button with delusions of grandeur and a glacier-sized chip on their shoulder.

For those of you playing such Buttons, I hope that you enjoy the power trip.

Demo Link (same as before):

<https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/calebisbeingabitch/mygame/>

...

...

...

Wait What's This Oh No Jo Focus on Editing And Stop Starting Side Projects No Matter How Much Fun It Seems To Take The Premise of Lady Death's Diary and Create An Interactive Fiction Where The Main Character Dies Halfway Through The Story and Then You Go Back In Time To Replay Everything With The New Knowledge:

<https://dashingdon.com/play/nothingtoseehere/my-little-side-project/mygame/>

[Delivery Teaser: THAB Employee Guide, Page 65](#)

[Oct 31, 2023](#)

(For Halloween, based off that one illustrated how-to guide that always pops up on social media every October 31st.)

THAB EMPLOYEE GUIDE, PG 65:

What To Do Should You Find Yourself Buried Alive (For Non-Coffin Burials, see pg. 68)

Premature burial isn't a common happenstance on the job, but a THAB employee knows to be ready for anything! Should you find yourself buried alive, THAB recommends the following steps:

STEP ONE: Don't panic! Panicking means deeper breaths and air is now in now in limited supply, leaving you with approximately an hour until you asphyxiate. The only caveat is if you're a member of a species that doesn't require oxygen, in which case hyperventilate away! (For a comprehensive list of non-breathing species, see pg. 112. For non-breathing subspecies, see pg. 114.)

STEP TWO: Contact your handler. If you've been following proper THAB procedure, you should still be in possession of your work phone. Our patented quantum internet reaches underground, so simply press Emergency Button Nine and your handler will send a retrieval team for your body within the next four hours (Tuesdays excluded).

If you are not in possession of your work phone, please review the introductory portion of this text on pg. 2 entitled "Courier Basics." Couriers buried alive without their work phones may face disciplinary action.

STEP THREE: If it's a Tuesday (or if you've neglected to keep ahold of your work phone, see pg. 2), the next step is to determine what type of coffin you're buried in. Lucky for you, most vampires prefer to bury their spawn in biodegradable pine boxes due to vampire culture's focus on both environmentalism and tradition. Standard-issue spawn coffins can be easily escaped from and are recognizable by their pale wood grain and interior blood stains.

Couriers turned into vampire spawn without prior approval from HR may face disciplinary action.

If you are buried in a traditional pine box, continue to **STEP FOUR**.

For modern coffins, skip to **STEP SEVEN**.

STEP FOUR: If you are buried in a pine box, remove your THAB-issued jacket and zipper it around your head. This barrier over your mouth and nose will prevent suffocation from falling graveyard dirt. For Couriers with magic permits, remember that THAB requires a completed Form B27 before any spellcasting is approved. If you have not passed your magic exam, or have not filled out Form B27, you'll need to use physical strength to escape. Bracing your fists against the top of the coffin, kick upwards to break through the pine lid.

Please note that drycleaning and repair fees for any damage done to the THAB employee uniform must be paid for by employee.

STEP FIVE: Once the coffin lid has splintered, push the falling dirt down towards your feet. Dig a trench around yourself, creating space to sit up. Remember: don't panic! Try to think of this experience as a fun day at the beach. What kid hasn't been buried in sand by their friends?

At THAB, we value our clients as cherished friends. Even when they bury us alive.

STEP SIX: Crawl upwards towards the surface using a swimming motion. (Remember, this is a fun beach day! Your life is only as endangered as your mindset is weak.) Eventually, you'll be able to crawl out of your grave.

(For negotiating with hostile vampires, go to pg. 23.)

If you are unable to escape the coffin, continue to **STEP SEVEN**.

STEP SEVEN:

Should you be unable to break out of the coffin for any reason, rap insistently on the coffin lid. A rescuer might hear you, or your buriers might become so annoyed that they dig you back up. Do not scream, unless you are a species listed on pgs. 112-114, as this will only use up your limited oxygen.

Whatever happens, don't worry! When you don't show up to work the next day, your handler will track your microchip to collect your body.

(For information on whether you qualify for THAB's exclusive Next Life Program, see pg. 203.)

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

[Nov 30, 2023](#)

I don't want to be here.

The thought occurs as a man bumps into you, spilling neon green liquid down your shirt that smells at once acrid and sickly sweet.

"No worries," the man slurs, eyes glazed and mind already elsewhere. He shoves past you, more alcohol sloshing over the rim of his plastic cup and onto your sleeve as he throws his hands in the air and does what might've passed, were he sober and more coordinated, as an old-school hand jive. Other bodies writhe around him in offbeat synchronicity, lost to the primitive pulse of EDM music.

For a brief moment, annoyance forces its way to the forefront of your mind. Several heads swivel in your direction: two on the dance floor, three more at the bar. Eyes widen with disoriented confusion as their musically/chemically-induced highs are interrupted by the persistent presence of your thoughts. The bouncer who you tagged earlier as an Empath frowns as he senses the unease from another Ment nearby, even though he himself is too far away to hear your thoughts.

I really didn't want to deal with this tonight.

Cursing under your breath, you shoulder your way through the crowd and into the center of the dancefloor before the Ments can spot you. This warehouse is a small venue, far smaller than you usually prefer, making it harder to disappear.

But not impossible.

You usually find it easy to get lost in the music, your mind going blissfully void of everything but the accelerating tempo and forceful lyrics, diction blurred by synthesis. Focus on the sounds intently enough, and nearby Ments can't differentiate your thoughts from the music. It's freeing, the way that you can turn invisible despite being surrounded by people.

Usually, it's freeing. Tonight, however, you're tired. Your shirt sticks to your front, the sickly-sweet scent of spilt alcohol mingling with odors of sweat as a dancer next to you, clearly not a devotee of deodorant, presses too close and rolls her body against yours.

You're out of brainrange from most the nearby Ments now, but a new head turns in your direction. The Ment's hand raises to her temple as if struck by a sudden headache, but you recognize in her confused expression the proof that she can hear you.

Damnit. Why can't I stop thinking tonight?

Shutting off your brain isn't usually this hard. Nearby, pills are surreptitiously traded between sweaty hands, the exchange illuminated by glowstick bracelets. Idly, you wonder what would happen were you reckless enough to try one of the yellow capsules promising oblivion. But your mind is vulnerable enough all on its own; Nick would murder you if he ever learned that you were foolish enough to experiment with sketchy drugs from a dubious source in public. For all you know, if you got high than every Ment in vicinity might experience a simultaneous psychedelic trip.

Granted, that possibility is almost amusing enough to make you cast caution to the wind. Given enough shrooms, could your brain cause Ments to see visions? It seems like it would be a good way to establish your own cult . . . were you willing to let your mind be even more vulnerable, which you're not. Being in public is dangerous enough for you when sober.

Dancers jump in the air as the current song ends and a new one immediately begins, smoke machines going into overdrive. You wince as someone steps on your foot.

The Ment with the headache is still scanning the crowd, searching for your presence. She hears that you've noticed her, your futile thought of *Please don't let her look this way* immediately causing her to turn in your direction. You duck behind one of the dancers, a man whose neon orange hoodie and dark black skin makes you think of Halloween. You wonder if the holiday coordination is deliberate, despite it being mid-July, after spotting the black cat earring dangling from his right ear.

The man grins as he realizes that you're attempting to mirror his movements in an effort not to be seen by someone. You can't make out most of his features due to the flashing lights but unlike most of the surrounding partiers his gaze is still sharp and clear.

He leans in so that you can hear his voice over the music. "Hiding from an ex?" he queries. "Let me know if you need me to *cha-cha-slide* you to the exit."

Despite the Ment still alerted to your presence, a laugh slips out of your lips at the absurdity of his statement. His grin widens, teeth flashing blue beneath the strobing lights.

"I'm serious!" the man exclaims. "It wouldn't be the first time that I've waltzed my way out of trouble!" His fingertips tap against your elbow, demonstrating his willingness to guide you out of the crowd should you so desire.

Clearly, your plans to disappear into music tonight aren't working.

"Why not?" you say recklessly. "I like a little trouble."

The man throws back his head in a full-bodied laugh that creates a pleasant warmth to spread in your belly. You grin, inordinately proud to have been the reason for his amusement.

"Well now I think that I like *you*," he says, still chuckling.

He holds up a hand, inviting you to accept it. Once your fingers interlock, he proceeds to wrap an arm around your waist, drawing you close enough for the proximity to be unnerving although not as near as some of the couples grinding up against each other next to you.

His head tilts to the side, eyes questioning as he seeks confirmation that this is okay. In response, you place a hand upon his shoulder as if about to engage in a foxtrot. He laughs again.

He says something just as the DJ launches into a new song, louder than the one before, and his question is lost beneath the noise. You nod anyway.

With surprising grace, the man weaves the both of you between flailing limbs and jostling bodies. It's not an intricate dance, but his steps are smooth and confident. A few times, he pulls you closer to avoid bumping into someone, but his hand on your hip relaxes once there's enough space. You almost wish that he'd pull you closer, which is a ridiculous notion because you're only ninety-eight percent certain that he isn't a Ment.

A Ment would've said something by now, though. The man, who is probably your age or a few years older, doesn't stare at you like an oddity whose thoughts he's overhearing. He clearly just sees you as someone who needed help, maybe a newbie to the house music scene dealing with a panic attack or a bad trip. His kindness surprises you almost as much as your willingness to take advantage of it.

Within a few minutes, you've both reached the exit. It's quieter here, the coatrack blocking you from the view of any nearby Ments. Still, you tug on your new companion's sleeve, leading him out the door and into the back alley.

This should be safe. Out here, you should be out of the brainrange of the Ments still within the club.

"Are you okay?" the man asks, glancing down to where you're still holding onto his sleeve.

You let go, embarrassed to have been caught holding on like a kid afraid of losing their parent at Disneyland.

"I'm fine," you lie. "It was just noisy in there."

His small grin is amused without being derisive. "I think that's kinda the point."

"It is," you concede. "I just wasn't feeling the vibe tonight, I guess."

He nods as if your explanation makes perfect sense.

"Thanks for pulling me out of there," you add, your hands twisting awkwardly in front of you. "It all felt . . ."

"Overwhelming?" he fills in gently.

This time it's your turn to nod.

"I'm just glad that no one was bothering you," the man says. "Given the way you were acting, I was worried that someone was being a pest."

"They weren't doing it deliberately." Truth blurts out of your mouth before you can reign it back in.

His brows raise, the silver stud on the left brow gleaming in the moonlight, but he takes your avoidance of his gaze as a cue and refrains from asking follow-up questions.

"So," he says lightly, "do I get a reward for the rescue?"

Heat races to your cheeks at his suggestive purr, your mind flooding with images of the ways that you could potentially *reward* him. Images that you really, REALLY hope that no Ments are close enough to be privy to. Just in case, you shuffle a few feet away from the door and further into the alley.

Your companion catches your shoulders before you can trip over a half-eaten hotdog. He holds on until you regain your balance, then lets go and splays out his fingers in a *hands-off* gesture.

"I meant your number!" he explains hastily, not needing to be a Ment to pick up on your interpretation of his words when your awkward response more than advertises the raunchy direction of your imagination. "Just your number. I don't know who you were trying to avoid inside, but I'm not trying to pressure you or anything." He runs a hand over his head, his black hair cropped so close that at first glance you'd mistaken his scalp for cleanshaven. "Shit," he mutters. "I wasn't trying to make you feel uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable!" you blurt, feeling an urgent need to ease his misplaced guilt. "Just . . . flustered."

His lips slowly curve upwards in a smug smirk. "Flustered?" he repeats. He leans in, close enough that you can smell mint gum on his breath. "I can work with flustered."

You lean in forward as well, pressing your lips to his before you can reevaluate the situation and conclude that kissing a strange man in a dark alleyway behind a rave feet away from several Ments is probably *not* a smart life decision for someone with your circumstances. Your kiss is fumbling and awkward, fueled in equal parts by gratitude, desire, and your lingering wish to lose yourself in something tonight even if it's not music.

You want to forget. Forget about the argument with your parents, forget that tomorrow is the day you learn whether or not you were accepted to Aeon. You want to forget that Sally said she no longer wants to go to art school and that her change of heart is probably your fault because you wanted to join Unity and she won't let you do it alone. Forget that you're terrified that you made the wrong decisions about your future. Forget that you're broken.

The stranger cusps your chin, tilting your head to adjust the angle of your kiss so that he has greater access to your mouth. His tongue slips between your lips, and you taste mint but shockingly no alcohol. It doesn't matter, because the kiss itself is intoxicating, his intensifying exploration of your mouth leaving you dizzy and weak-kneed.

You want more.

You tug at the strings of his hoodie, pulling him closer and silently demanding control of the kiss. Your tongues parry, neither willing to concede the upper hand, until he lets out a gasped whimper as, struck by frustrated inspiration, you suck in his lower lip.

Electronic music pulses from the warehouse within, your heartbeats throbbing in rhythm with the muffled beat. His hand drifts to your throat, and your pulse flutters against the back of his knuckles, suddenly out of sync with the music, as he traces down the line of your neck.

"What's your name?" he asks, voice hoarse.

The question douses you with a pail of icy water. You recoil, too caught up in your own anxiety to reassure him that your reaction isn't his fault and that he didn't do anything wrong. Of course, he would ask for your name; that's something people usually do before they start sucking each other's face off. But your name isn't just a name, it's a burden. It's a reputation that doesn't fit, a legacy that you didn't inherit.

Why couldn't he have just let you remain a stranger? You were pretending to be normal, damnit, and had half convinced yourself that your family didn't matter. Even though you know that he didn't mean it that way, that he had just wanted something to call you by, your brain keeps repeating *Wiseman*, *Wiseman*, *Wiseman* over and over again like a cursed mantra.

"I have to go," you blurt, suddenly needing to be alone. Out of sight from his concerned gaze, because if he can't see you then maybe you can keep pretending that you don't exist, even if only for one night.

"You don't have to tell me," reassures the man who temporarily helped you forget. He sounds concerned, and part of you wants to love him for that.

But the illusion is shattered now. You've remembered who you are, and you can't bear to witness his disappointment were he to learn your identity as well. Because you're a Wiseman, but you're also very much not.

"I have to go," you repeat, already backing away. "Thank you for tonight. It was fun."

"Fun." The man's laugh isn't as enthusiastic as before, a hint of hurt darkening his chuckle. "Well, I guess it's not bad as far as Yelp reviews go." He rubs the back of his neck. "Did I do something wrong? I thought that we were on the same page."

The same page. You want to laugh, or cry, at the idea that you could even be written within the same *book* as someone so normal and perfect.

"I'm sorry," you say, turning away before the hurt in his brown eyes causes you to second-guess your decision.

Someone kind enough to rescue a panicking stranger at a party deserves a normal relationship, and normal is something that you'll never be.

* * * *

Two months later

"Clarebear, you stewed prune, are you harassing one of the first years again?"

The question comes from a man your side, who must have snuck up while you were busy contemplating Clarence's need for therapy.

The newcomer regards you from beneath hooded lids, but a mischievous sparkle in his brown eyes belies any initial impression of lethargy. Rather than pinned to his collar, the three silver stars denoting his class year have been repurposed as piercings along his upper right ear. Something about him feels vaguely familiar, setting you at ease despite your usual wariness of strangers.

For whatever reason, this man doesn't feel like a stranger.

"Cadet Parker," Clarence's voice drips with venom. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

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

[Nov 30, 2023](#)

I don't want to be here.

The thought occurs as a man bumps into you, spilling neon green liquid down your shirt that smells at once acrid and sickly sweet.

"No worries," the man slurs, eyes glazed and mind already elsewhere. He shoves past you, more alcohol sloshing over the rim of his plastic cup and onto your sleeve as he throws his hands in the air and does what might've passed, were he sober and more coordinated, as an old-school hand jive. Other bodies writhe around him in offbeat synchronicity, lost to the primitive pulse of EDM music.

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For whatever reason, this woman doesn’t feel like a stranger.

“Cadet Parker,” Clarence’s voice drips with venom. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

[Vengeance Route Final Boss, Beware Mega Spoilers.](#)

[Nov 30, 2023](#)

Bear with me, y'all. The endings are coming.

Not as fast as I expected, but definitely before the end of this calendar year.

All versions of Chapters 16 and 17 will be released in a few days as well as Chapter 18 (concluding chapter for the Vengeance-Ending). There was too much jumping between files for me to post them separately. Link will remain the same for this next update, much to Caleb's displeasure. Will post a longer post once mega update is out.

Until then, here's a snippet from Chapter 18. This gives away the final boss of the Vengeance Route (not Shard!), so only read on if you don't mind having this variation of the plot completely revealed.

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"Leave us," Mayor Zarneki orders.

Reese's lips thin in protest. "Tobias, it's not wise to—"

"River."

At Mayor Zarneki's utterance of $\{this\}$ real name, Reese falls silent. $\{This\}$ gaze darts between you and the mayor, bright green eyes glassy with unease. $\{This\}$ normal arrogance is gone, replaced by a flimsy bravado that you could probably snuff out as easily as a birthday candle.

It feels like a birthday party in a way, one celebrating the emergence of a new you. If Reese has to die for that to happen, so be it.

**if (Rdislike)*

You never liked the smarmy bastard anyway.

"I should be here for anything Wiseman has to say," Reese argues, $\{this\}$ voice a low, angry hiss. But you recognize $\{this\}$ true form now: not a king cobra, but a fangless garden snake. "I deserve to stay."

Mayor Zarneki laughs, the sound jarringly cheerful. $\{Kent\}$'s father has a nice laugh, warm and rounded. It's the type of laugh that wins over voters, although you can't tell whether the hearty timbre is natural or cultivated.

"You'll do whatever I tell you to do," Mayor Zarneki informs Reese, his tone as flat as his frown as his laughter dies down. "Pretend to be in charge all you want in front of your followers, but you agreed to this arrangement." He points to the door. "Now leave."

With one final, petulant glare in your direction, Reese exits the booth.

**if (Al-lie)*

You hear $\{thim\}$ stomp, footsteps heavy with displeasure, towards the kitchen where $\{Andy\}$ and Boris await.

**else*

You hear $\{thim\}$ stomp, footsteps heavy with displeasure, towards the kitchen where Caleb and Boris await.

Mayor Zarneki settles back in his seat, his grey eyes (a duller version of $\{Kent\}$'s) observing you. His relaxed posture is deceptive; one misstep, and he'll make sure that Unity never learns of your betrayal because your body will never be found.

He looks down at his wristwatch, gold inlaid with diamond chips and probably costing more than you've made at part time jobs over the course of your entire life. Better than most public servants can afford by

far.

"Your proposition is audacious," he says. "I'll give you two minutes to convince me."

[Almost Fully Baked, Please Stand By.](#)

[Dec 31, 2023](#)

Cryptic title aside, my goal is to have everything (yes, EVERYTHING) posted by New Year's Eve tomorrow. Should be possible. I'm trying to make it possible, and have spent the last twelve hours in front of my computer today making it possible. My mom has been slipping encouragement cards beneath the door into my office, which has been super sweet and motivating <3

Until tomorrow, however, have an epilogue (spoilers abound for Vengeance route, so be forewarned reading from this point on). The epilogue is coded, but I left in all the variables so that you can see which different factors alter the aftermath (i.e. you get three different options for henchperson, decided in the final chapter). The Vengeance Route also has a secondary epilogue should Button choose to fake their own death.

The non-Vengeance routes have over 20 different epilogues files, just in case you don't want to become an evil politician/lobbyest.

. . . I want to write more but am going to forcibly stop myself and go back to fixing Interpersonal Button. (High Interpersonal skill is basically a cheat in some endings, as it means that you're a very convincing liar and can bypass other requirements in order for people to believe you. However, those absent conditions need to be reflected in dialogue which is something I completely overlooked while writing and am now fixing.)

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VENGEANCE EPILOGUE #1

**if (publicface)*

“Senator, it’s time to wake up.”

**elseif (Borisminion)*

**set \${Andy} “Boris”*

“\${Name}, it’s time to wake up.”

**elseif (ALminion)*

“\${Name}, it’s time to wake up.”

**else (Calebminion)*

**set \${Andy} “Caleb”*

“Wake up, \${Boss}!”

You groan and roll over, folding your pillow around your head like a feather taco. You’d been in the middle of a particularly nice dream and have no desire to return to reality. Why couldn’t you come from a normal family? Have a normal alarm clock that you could smack or throw across the room in order to . .

.

Your eyes snap open at the belated realization that the voice bidding you to wake up is doing so out loud. Nor does belong to Nick.

A quick glance over at your nightstand confirms that the intercom is lit green.

**if (Borisminion)*

“You have an early brunch with Senator Shelby, as well as a ten am meeting scheduled with the League of Voluntary Ex-Ments,” Boris continues, his voice way too energetic for—you squint at the alarm clock—six am in the morning.

**elseif (ALminion)*

“You have an early brunch with that witch Senator Shelby, plus a ten am meeting scheduled with the League of Voluntary Ex-Ments,” \${Andy} continues, \${khis} voice way too energetic for—you squint at the alarm clock—six am in the morning.

**else*

“Sorry to bug you, but you have an early brunch with Senator Shelby, plus a ten am meeting with the League of Voluntary Ex-Ments,” Caleb continues, his voice way too energetic for—you squint at the alarm clock—six am in the morning.

You groan.

**fake_choice*

#“Does L.O.V.E. have another idea for a fundraiser? Their last attempt with the dolphin did [i]not[/i] go well.”

**if (Borisminion)*

Boris echoes your groan. “Don’t remind me. I still have nightmares about all the phone calls that I had to fend from animal rights activists.”

You shudder and bring the blanket up to your chin as if the fabric can protect you from PETA’s wrath.

**elseif (ALminion)*

`\${Andy}` snickers. “I dunno. It was kinda funny, even if the animal rights activists were a pain in my ass to deal with.”

You roll your eyes. Only `\${Andy}` would find joy at something that caused an entire class of first graders to burst into tears.

**else*

Caleb sighs sadly. “Those poor creatures.”

Those poor creatures indeed.

#“Can I skip the meal with Shelby? The woman somehow lived to be eighty-two without learning how to moderate her mimosa intake.”

**if (Borisminion)*

“I’ve ensured that today’s restaurant doesn’t serve alcohol,” Boris says. “It should be fine.”

“Boris?”

“Yeah, boss?”

“Give yourself a raise.”

Boris's smugness comes through the intercom. "Already did."

**elseif (ALminion)*

\$_{Andy} snickers. "At least the meal will come with a show."

"Then you go," you grumble testily.

"Not the elected official!" *\$_{Andy}* says cheerily. "That's all you, boss."

You groan and burrow beneath the blanket as if the fabric can protect you from the reality of your job.

**else*

"She's really nice, though!" Caleb says eagerly. His voice drops to a mortified whisper over the com.

"Although she keeps asking to see photos of my cat."

"You have a cat?"

"No," Caleb confirms. "Do you think I should get one?"

"You want to get a cat because the Senator thinks you have one?"

"Not really," Caleb says. "I just think it would be kinda cool to have a cat."

#"You know that I can wake up by myself, right? If this keeps up, I'm taking back my house key."

**if (Borisminion)*

"Remember that paper I had you sign a month ago?" Boris asks.

"You shove a lot of papers of papers in front of me."

"True," he agrees easily. "Anyhow, it was a renegotiation of my employee contract. I'm legally obligated to wake you up should you ever be in jeopardy of missing an important meeting."

"I'm guessing that you also gave yourself a raise?"

"Of course."

You chuckle. Whatever extra Boris is making you pay him, he's worth every penny. "I'll be down in a moment."

**elseif (ALminion)*

\$_{Andy} snickers at the oft-repeated threat. "Whatever you say, boss. Want anything for breakfast?"

Traumatic images of \${Andy}'s last attempt at "breakfast" flash through your mind.

"I'll just wait for brunch with Shelby," you reply.

*else

"I'm sorry!" Caleb exclaims. "You asked that I come in early to arrange the documents that you needed for today, and I noticed that you weren't up yet, and I just—"

You heave a sigh. "It's fine, Caleb. I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Can I make you anything for breakfast?"

Traumatic images of Caleb's last attempt at "breakfast" flash through your mind.

"I'll just wait for brunch with Shelby," you reply.

***if ((ALminion) and (dumbcrush))**

#"\${Andy}, I already told you: now that we're dating, I want to be woken up with kisses instead of a to-do list."

\${Andy} laughs. "I'll make it up to you tonight, but your schedule today is packed. I had to get an early start."

You heave a sigh. "I'm on my way down."

"Can I bring you up anything?"

Traumatic images of \${Andy}'s last attempt at a "romantic breakfast in bed" flash through your mind.

"I'll just wait for brunch with Shelby," you reply.

*page_break

***if (Calebminion)**

"Oh! I almost forgot about that thing you told me to research!" Caleb exclaims over the intercom as you get out of bed. "I found something."

***elseif (ALminion)**

"By the way, remember that thing you told me to research?" \${Andy} adds over the intercom as you get out of bed. "Caleb found something."

*else

"By the way, remember that thing you told me to research?" Boris adds over the intercom as you get out of bed. "Our people found something."

Your heartrate quickens at the possibility of finally, after all these years, learning the identity of the Ment that used you to bomb Aeon. The Ment to whom, ironically, you owe your current power and status.

Also payback. You owe them lots and lots of payback.

"Do you have a name?" you ask \${Andy}.

"More like . . . a potential lead," \${Andy} hedges. "Just as you suspected, most of the victims from the Vancouver bombing had Ment family members, but none had immediate connections who were in the Chicago area back when you were attending Aeon."

**fake_choice*

#"That sounds like a dead end."

"It was," \${Andy} confirms, "but Unity recently updated one of their employee files."

#"There better be a 'but' in that sentence, or I'm docking your wages."

"There is," \${Andy} confirms. "Unity recently updated one of their employee files."

#"Could the Ment have just had a freakishly wide brainrange?"

"Maybe they were able to control me despite staying outside city limits," you suggest.

"I considered as much," \${Andy} replies, "but found a more likely possibility after Unity updated their employee files."

#"Get to the point, \${Andy}."

"Unity recently updated an employee file," \${Andy} reveals. "There's a previously overlooked connection."

#I wait patiently, not wanting to disrupt \${Andy}'s explanation.

"Unity recently updated an employee file," \${Andy} reveals. "There's a previously overlooked connection."

You freeze with your shirt half over your head.

"The documents should already be in your email," \${Andy} says. "Let me know if it's an angle that you want to pursue. Personally, I don't see how it could be a coincidence."

(Yes, Vengeance! Button can choose to date Andy/Liz in the future. You already sided with Vengeance, so why not make even more bad decisions? AL may be an unhinged psychopath, but they can be YOUR unhinged psychopath.)

s already restricted from the gas

skin is almost luminescent in the dim

ever, and \$(khis) eyes quiver as \$(khe)

Adding Scenes

Keyboard Shortcuts [Hot

(1670),1711#1 (1712),1730#1 (1731),1761#1
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#1 (1891),1924#1 (1925),1945#1 (1946),2003#1
#1 (2025),2057#1 (2058),2078#1 (2079),2105#1
#1 (2124),2139F,2235#1 (2236),2257#1 (2258),2333#1
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#1 (440),462#1 (463),499#1 (500),549#1 (550),691#2
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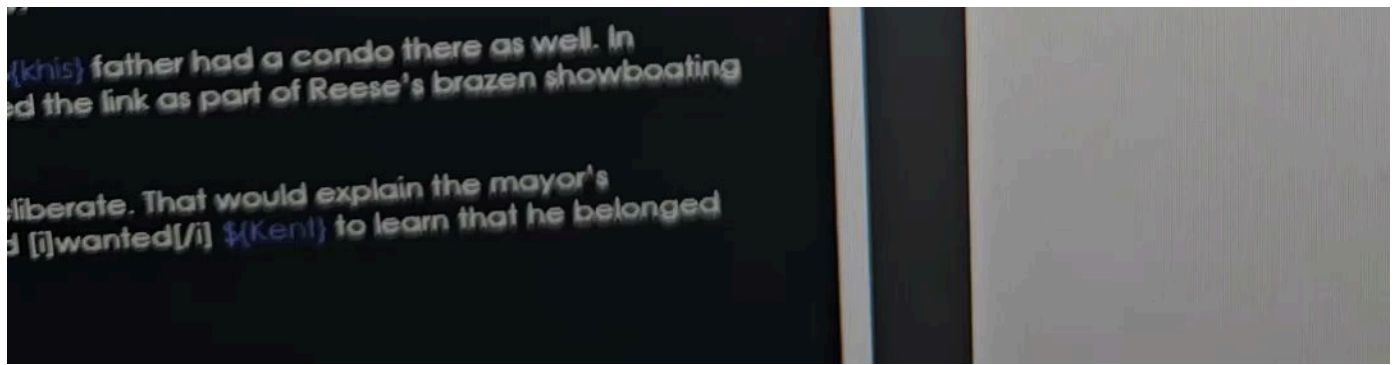
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[Bug testing is incredibly exciting](#)

[Jan 1, 2024](#)

[Mind Blind January Update](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

Scroll to very bottom for demo link (it's the same).

If you've played the demo this month, you might have noticed that all of Chapter 17 was quietly added to the Vengeance Route. Chapter 18V (the final chapter to the Vengeance Route) is still fractured with "under construction" signs, though, because of a character who *literally* speaks in circles. More explanation on that below.

Sigh. Given how often I've failed to deliver the last chapter, all I can do is promise to keep the demo link the same. Honestly, I'd probably have the coding all fixed if I didn't keep rewriting entire scenes every time that I go to fix a single bug. I need someone to sit by me while I work and smack my hands whenever I start typing anything but a code fix.

I didn't want to post until everything was updated (mostly because I wanted to say THIS IS IT, like I planned to do months ago), but I've genuinely given up on an ETA at this point. Every time I think the game is finally playable, I replay and find something else majorly broken. I then go to fix the scene, and in the process rewrite an entire chapter because I can't keep well enough alone.

(One other note is that Juliette is now easier to meet with in Chapter 10. I don't know why so many playthroughs were unable to meet her, but I rewrote the code to lower the variables and to fix any accidental spaces that may have been breaking things. If you still can't meet Jules in Chapter 10 despite having all the other Vengeance members fall in love with you, please-please-*please* let me know, because meeting Jules is a requirement for the Vengeance ending and I've spent several days

literally doing nothing but playing through Chapter 10 and trying to fix her. I think she sometimes bugs out in save files.)

If you haven't played Chapter 17V already, here are some of the highlights that were added:

(Spoiler warning)

-Choose your laughter type in a DIY evil monologue

"\${Kent} Zarneki, my old partner now nemesis. Ah, how the pendulum turns!"

"Pendulums swing," Boris points out.

-Learn Andy/Liz's full history with Reese

"Reese miscalculated."

That small admission, although barely accusatory, drains all of \${Andy}'s previously combative energy. \${Khis} shoulders slump, and \${khe} looks at you and Boris with an expression too hollow and weary to belong to someone in \${khis} mid-twenties.

-Watch as Romanced Kenzie realizes that you joined Vengeance in The Worst Scene Ever (Not, actually, the worst scene ever, but the worst scene in this chapter.)

You once fantasized about a honeymoon in Bali; now you're holding the groom hostage in a basement.

-Reach a horrible realization (Or wonderful if you hate Nick, I suppose?)

No blurb for this one, because it's a major spoiler. You can't miss it, though.

Some things to note about the Vengeance ending chapters:

You can have a positive relationship with Nick and still ally with Vengeance. In fact, saving Nick can be your primary motive for joining Vengeance, because Button can view a permanent BRS as a way to "free" their brother.

Everything considered, I do think the changes I worked in this month are for the better. Originally, I was super preoccupied with *Mind Blind* feeling like a complete experience regardless of your choices. By "complete experience," I mean that I wanted as many secrets as possible to be unveiled in each and every ending, with really on Shard's identity being held back due to certain choices.

The result was a lot of very contrived and very forced exposition, because I wanted Button to (for example) learn the truth about Vancouver even if you didn't go with the Vengeance ending. Even if that meant awkwardly shoving that truth in between your mother's breakdown and Gray's dramatic declaration of love.

After growing more and more dissatisfied with these scenes, I finally accepted that (bracing breath) it's *okay* if a single playthrough doesn't reveal all major plot points. In fact, interactive fiction's strength is replayability, and replaying is more rewarding if each ending reveals something new.

The endings still feel complete and make for a rewarding narrative arc (I hope), but it's now impossible to learn EVERYTHING in any single ending.

(SPOILERS)

With the reworks, you'll never learn Nick's Deep Dark Secret™ if you choose to ally with Vengeance. (Before, Reese awkwardly handed you a paper saying "here's your brother's file, muahaha." It didn't work. At all.)

Nor do you learn about Tobias's role in Vengeance if you choose to go save Nick instead of taking down Vengeance. And the truth behind Vancouver is only fully revealed if you play through twice: once allying with Vengeance to learn about the culprit(s), and once if you manage to uncover Shard's identity and motives.

Not all the issues that I'm fixing are narrative—90% of my work right now is just rewriting code. Because, unfortunately, having the code functional is not the same as having the code *working*. Functional code requires running tests; working code requires playthroughs, and playthroughs take a lot of time especially when I can't fix a single sentence without rewriting it.

The reason that Chapter 18 isn't up tonight that Tobias's scene has looping dialogue depending on how Button tries to win him over. This conversation completely broke after I attempted to make sure it correctly reflected Button's past interactions with Kenzie: whether you've read the article, visited Maria's grave, and how you treated Tobias in the beginning. I'm working to fix the issues and can only apologize for the constant delays; I've also left in some of the (very broken) Chapter 18 code that you can play through to get an idea of why the structure is killing my soul.

. . . Okay, this got ramblly. Sorry. I really need to stop writing posts at 3am.

My progress has also slowed down due to external factors, unfortunately. My mom's cancer migrated to her lungs. They were thankfully able to remove a nodule with surgery, but at this point it's up to the universe.

The last few months have been really, really tough.

Woman is still climbing Kilimanjaro in two weeks, though, because fuck cancer.

In cuter, more uplifting and definitely cuddlier news: three years ago, I promised to reward myself with a dog once I finally finished writing *Mind Blind*. She arrives next month, giving me just enough time to hopefully get everything up before she arrives. She's my self-granted reward for writing the equivalent of *The Lord of the Rings* series (*The Hobbit* included) in under four years. Do I wish it had only taken two years? Yes, absolutely, but life has a way of sucker punching you in the kidney and derailing plans.

I would also like to clarify that *Mind Blind* is only the equivalent to *Lord of the Rings* in regard to word count quantity, not quality. Tolkien was a godly wordsmith capable of creating his own languages, while I snicker over the sentence:

"Boris shivers at the sinisterness of your snicker, and even {Andy}, a consummate snicker-er himself, takes an involuntary step backward."

It's been a wild ride, y'all. Chapter 18V will go up once Tobias's dialogue pathing is fixed.

Also, I promise to post puppy pics.

Demo Link: <https://dashingdon.com/play/wildelight/calebisbeingabitch/mygame/>

[Mind Blind Fairy Tale: Jump Rope](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

Note: *This was inspired by a dream I had where Glitch conquered the Roman Empire with rope-jumping centurians. Sorry. I don't make the rules, my subconscious does.*

The Imperial family of Cathal did not try to kill each other. Foreign emissaries, upon learning of this strange behavior, unanimously agreed that such behavior was peculiar and overall considered the lack of assassination to be very bad form, borderline barbaric.

Like most bizarre traditions in Cathal, such as goat throwing and infant baptism, the lack of conflict between the heirs to the throne had its roots in the Empire's founding. The first Emperor had initially been a general who, immediately upon conquering most the continent of Verdan, experienced such extreme and persistent buyer's remorse that his last words to his heir were "Get out while you still can."

Alas, Valeria Wister Aeon had never been an obedient child, a trait she came to regret within a week of taking the throne. She did, however, protect her own children by declaring her brother's son Crown Prince. Future Emperor Rhys Valerius Aeon was the youngest of the Emperess Valeria's nieces and nephews. Rhys accepted the promotion to Crown Prince due to the fact that, at three months old, he lacked verbal skills to scream "NO!" like his older siblings.

In the two hundred years since Emperor Rhys's death at thirty-eight, the Imperial throne had been passed down, sideways, and even backwards through the Aeon lineage (after Emperor Maximillian Tiber's death, Empress Valeria III valiantly spared her grandchildren the agony of leadership by accepting the crown herself). Despite the occasional curvature in inheritance, the lineage remained

unbroken. Each of Cathal's rulers had been a direct descendant of the original conquering general, and each despised the job as much as their family's founder.

The hereditary reluctance of the Aeons in regard to the throne was, as a matter of fact, absolutely wonderful for the Cathal Empire as a whole. Throughout history, those Aeons who volunteered to inherit did so out of noble self-sacrifice and devotion to their siblings, and these character traits meant that they usually made for pretty decent leaders. In such rare cases, everybody won except the poor martyr forced to sit through all the Noble Council meetings.

Because the heir was chosen from all eligible children rather than defaulting to the oldest, the princes and princesses devoted themselves at a young age to mastering alternative subjects. From magic to accounting, each potential heir's goal was to become so valuable in their chosen field that their skillset couldn't be wasted on something as trivial as the throne.

Opening schools in one's chosen field was a particularly effective route to avoid becoming Emperor, and thus the Cathal Empire boasted many of the best academies in the world as well as twelve or thirteen Magic Towers (depending on whether the person counting considered restoration magic to be a valid discipline).

The point was: no one wanted the throne because it came with a lot of paperwork and not a whole lot of gratitude. Being the Emperor meant accepting blame for everything that went wrong in Cathal, including but not limited to civil wars between noble factions and natural disasters like floods and famine. It meant that you were likely to die before ever reaching age forty, because one of the dukes would probably orchestrate your murder if you refused to marry his child. Being Emperor meant being chronically sleep deprived, and possibly missing the birth of your children (or, as in the case of Empress Rhiannon, having one's water break in the middle of trade negotiations with the southern dukedom of Hint).

Who in the world would want to be an emperor when they could instead be an overeducated dilettante? Inheriting a small manor on a remote tropical island was vastly preferable to permanent residence in Cathal's capital city. Winrose Palace was cold, drafty, and worst of all infested with nobility wielding petitions.

Having everyone bow to you was, Aeon heirs agreed, inadequate compensation for sacrificing one's entire existence.

Talia Aeon, however, thought differently. To her, becoming Empress was the ultimate goal. She couldn't pinpoint why she felt that way; like her cousins, her childhood bedtime stories had consisted of being taken to her uncle's office and drinking hot milk from golden mugs while listening to the current Emperor complain about his job for half an hour. She knew that prior emperors and empresses had all died regrets, having relinquished their own personal happiness for the Empire's continued wellbeing. Her own father, as a matter of fact, had been Emperor before her uncle, and that was why Talia had no memories of him even though she'd been eight when her father passed away—he'd been too busy as the nation's father to spend much time in the role of a biological one.

"You realize that none of your ancestors has ever enjoyed being Emperor, right?" Talia's friend pointed it out one afternoon. She and Kent were taking his hellhounds for a walk through the royal gardens. Winrose Palace's royal gardens were some of the most beautiful in the world, the result of Talia's great-aunt having thrown herself into the study of botany to avoid being drafted as Empress.

"Well, maybe they've been doing it wrong," Talia rebutted. "Just look at Orula. They had a civil war five years ago because both princes *wanted* to be king."

"That's Orula," countered Kent.

He tugged Antigone's leash, pulling her back before she could stick her nose into a bush of rosary peas. Most plants in the royal garden were poisonous, planted by Talia's great-aunt out of consideration for her younger brother (Talia's grandfather) who inherited the throne. An escape route, the aunt had called it, should the role of Emperor ever succeed in overwhelming him. The two siblings had been famously fond of each other.

"Your own great-grandmother thanked her assassin," Kent reminded Talia, as if she were not already fully versed in the history of her family.

"You've seen the paintings of her husband," Talia said with a shrug. "According to all the records about Count Reese, it's no wonder she found death a blessing."

"Another reason why you shouldn't become Crown Princess," Kent said. "You won't be able to choose your own spouse."

For an indulgent moment, Talia recalled the last time she'd met Ellery. El, with the contagious laugh and wicked smirk. El, who was born into a magic-obsessed family yet wasn't a mage, and who was thus ineligible to become Duke Wiseman's heir despite the Duke's firstborn abandoning the family to open a bakery. Which meant El needed to marry a mage according to Wiseman family traditions.

Talia was not a mage. Had she been a mage, she might have considered opening a new Magic Tower instead of becoming Empress.

"I never wanted to get married anyway," Talia lied.

"As Empress, you'll have to if the Council says it's for the good of the Empire."

"Then I should disband the Council."

Kent almost dropped the dog leash in shock. "You can't disband the Council," he said. "It keeps the Imperial family accountable to the people."

"They keep us *hostage*," Talia shot back. "The throne may as well stay empty given how difficult it is for the current Emperor pass any laws."

“And tyranny is the answer?”

Kent looked at her disapprovingly, and Talia let out a frustrated groan.

“Gods, Kent, it’s not like I’m planning mass executions,” she said. “It would just be nice if the most powerful position in Cathal actually had some real power.”

Kent didn’t reply, too busy pulling Cassandra away from a plot of foxglove.

* * * *

The Empress was insane. Most citizens of Cathal had never met their newly crowned ruler, but they still knew that much. For one thing, she hadn’t even tried to found a merchant company or open a school of music in order to dodge the throne.

No, the Empress had supposedly *volunteered* for the position. Volunteered, when she didn’t have any siblings to save and according to rumor wasn’t all that close to her cousins. What kind of maniac, her new subjects wondered, would volunteer for such a role.

Especially given the prior Emperor’s untimely death. The official reason for the demise of Talia’s uncle had been a heart attack, but everyone in the Palace had witnessed him frequenting the gardens more and more often while gazing longingly at certain plants.

During Empress Talia’s coronation, whispered some officials, she had grabbed—actually *grabbed*—the crown from Duke Wiseman’s hands instead of waiting for him to put it on her head as custom demanded. She had then refused to wear it, claiming that the metal was too cold against her scalp.

Although Duke Wiseman had seemed more amused than offended by her behavior, the break from tradition had the Royal Council frothing at the mouth with rage, confusion, and maybe even (although never admitted to) fear.

“She’s a menace!” exclaimed Lord Clarence Garfield.

“What kind of Empress wants to actually lead?” grumbles Lady Elizabeth Guerra. “The audacity!”

“I think she’s kind of cool,” whispered Sir Caleb. “Scary, but cool.”

“No one asked your opinion,” snapped Lady Elizabeth.

* * * *

Decades later, children in the Cathal Empire would jump rope to this nursery rhyme:

The Empress’s rope

Strangled and choked

All the wicked men (men).

She twirled and whirled

And thinned the herd

'Til everyone was friends (friends)!

Lords took the crown

And forced it down

Upon her regal head (head).

Someone coughed,

So she took it off,

Then everyone was dead (dead)!

The nobles harried

Said get married

But she killed them all (all).

A wise man asked

Why she ran so fast.

It was so she didn't fall (fall).

The Empress's rope

Swung and hung

All the wicked men (men).

Those she didn't fought

She caught or bought.

And then did it again!

(Repeat to verse one)



Jakub



I have a spare pair to give u when I get back, but I would never ask to you to brave this weather 🧊

I mean, just imagine that obituary: "Here lies Jakub Peotr Zarneki. Froze to death while trying to be a good friend."

I could uber it

Haha

Funny name

4:12 PM

Oh god

I gave you Kent's last name

My character

I'm an idiot 🤡🤡🤡🤡

I got my polish last names mixed up

← Jakub



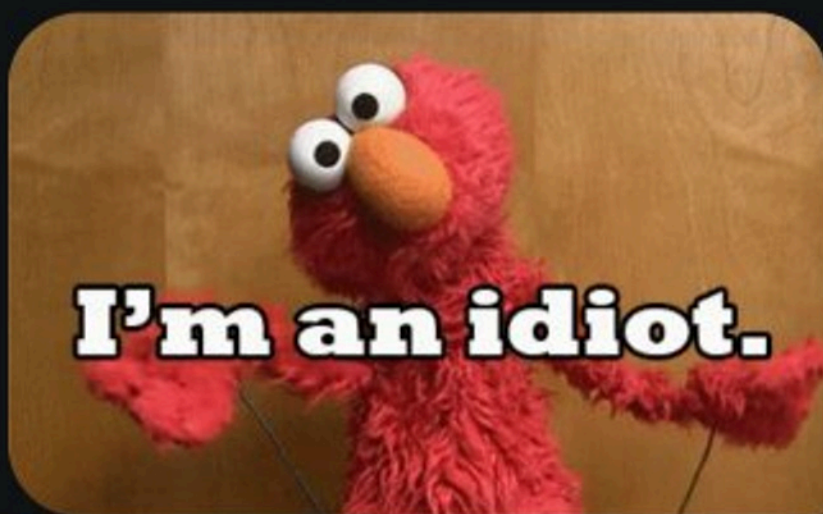
Zarneki is more Polish

So good call

In my defense, I'm writing a scene with a character called Mayor Zarneki so my fingers just automatically typed it 😂😂😂😂

Dear lord work is taking over my life

It's funny I like it



Brain is still in writing mode clearly

[When Reality Blurs](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

. . . I need to finish and move onto a new project before I write Tobias's name on my city ballot.

[Mind Blind Short Story: Heartbreak \(Kent Version\)](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

Note: This story is the K-romance breakup scene in Chapter 17 as told from Kenzie's perspective. There are minor spoilers, so you may want to play through Chapter 17 of the Vengeance Route before reading further.

“Kent, I—”

Something about the way Ellery looks at me makes me afraid. Fear isn't something that I'm used to feeling. Most things stopped seeming intimidating after my mom died.

“El—” My voice breaks before I can even get out their name. My throat burns, but I swallow through the dryness and try again. “El, tell me what's going on.”

I ask despite being terrified of the answer. Hiding from the truth doesn't make it go away, though my mind has spent the last week trying to run from certain realizations. Usually, I'm not the type of person to leap to conclusions, but Ellery's expression . . .

But Ellery's expression scares me.

I want to be wrong. I *need* to be wrong. I thought that Ellery was my reward, the universe's way of balancing everything and everyone that I've lost. If El stayed beside me, I could confront my father. I hadn't known that it was possible to feel that warm inside because of another person, and now I'm petrified of losing that feeling. Worse, of finding out that feeling has been based on a lie.

But there's a reason that the two Vengeance members aren't treating Ellery with hostility. I wish that my hands were free so that I could rip Andy's smug smirk off of his face. I don't want him or Boris here, don't want witnesses.

If Ellery is going to break my heart, I wish they would do it in private.

“Let me get you a glass of water first,” El says, avoiding my gaze. “Your throat is so dry that you can barely speak.”

Even if I could speak, I’m not sure what else I’d say. Ferro would say something clever and biting, but my mind draws a blank. Thinking up a response means acknowledging the situation, and I’m not ready to do that yet.

Ferro would also tell me to get a grip on myself. I wiggle my wrist, testing the strength of the bonds. Loose enough that I could slip free in fifteen minutes or so, probably without resorting to breaking my own thumb. My heart isn’t into planning the escape—I’m not even sure that I still have a heart. But Ferro will be disappointed if I don’t try.

Is that disappointment in Ellery’s expression? How can they look disappointed when they’re the one who betrayed me?

No. Maybe I’m wrong. This is El, after all. They’re smarter, maybe even smarter than Ferro. Our cover was blown, but maybe Ellery figured out a way to convince Boris and Andy it was all a misunderstanding.

“I’m leaving Operation Hemera,” Ellery says.

For the briefest second, I’m still hopeful. I don’t take the words at face value because Ellery must be acting.

. . . But I know Ellery.

Not as well as I thought, obviously. But I’ve found myself watching Ellery over these past weeks even when I tried focusing on other things. I know their mannerisms, the way the left side of their mouth lifts slightly higher than the right when they smile. I know that they’re telling the truth right now. Their expression is completely serious, and they’ve phrased things as bluntly as possible so that there’s no way I can misinterpret their message.

Ellery must’ve noticed the hope in my eyes. This is their way of being merciful, I guess, making it so I can’t read between the lines and reach the wrong conclusion.

The grief of losing Ellery is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced. I mourned my mom, but she was gone. Crying wouldn’t bring her back, so I tried to live my life the way she’d want me to. Ellery is still here, close enough to touch if my hands were free. Yet at the same time, Ellery is gone. My El, the one who I thought that I knew, the one that I made up in my head.

“Don’t do this to us.”

It takes me a moment to realize that I'm the one who has spoken. From Ellery's shocked expression, they're as taken aback by my words as I am. My father would laugh if he ever learned how pathetic I'm acting. 'Zarneki don't beg,' he always told me, but right now I'd crawl on my hands and knees if that meant Ellery would come back to me.

Ellery looks away.

Of course. They're not coming back.

The Ellery who I fell in love with never existed.

[Mind Blind Short Story: Heartbreak \(Kenna Version\)](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

Note: This story is the K-romance breakup scene in Chapter 17 as told from Kenzie's perspective. There are minor spoilers, so you may want to play through Chapter 17 of the Vengeance Route before reading further.

"Kenna, I—"

Something about the way Ellery looks at me makes me afraid. Fear isn't something that I'm used to feeling. Most things stopped seeming intimidating after my mom died.

"El—" My voice breaks before I can even get out their name. My throat burns, but I swallow through the dryness and try again. "El, tell me what's going on."

I ask despite being terrified of the answer. Hiding from the truth doesn't make it go away, though my mind has spent the last week trying to run from certain realizations. Usually, I'm not the type of person to leap to conclusions, but Ellery's expression . . .

But Ellery's expression scares me.

I want to be wrong. I *need* to be wrong. I thought that Ellery was my reward, the universe's way of balancing everything and everyone that I've lost. If El stayed beside me, I could confront my father. I hadn't known that it was possible to feel that warm inside because of another person, and now I'm petrified of losing that feeling. Worse, of finding out that feeling has been based on a lie.

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Talia would tell me to get a grip on myself if the communicator was still working. I wiggle my wrist, testing the strength of the bonds. Loose enough that I could slip free in fifteen minutes or so, probably without resorting to breaking my own thumb. My heart isn't into planning the escape—I'm not even sure that I still have a heart. But Talia will be disappointed if I don't try.

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Ellery looks away.

Of course. They're not coming back.

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[Mind Blind Short Story: The Best Last Day \(Kent Version\)](#)

[Feb 23, 2024](#)

Notes:

-This is a saddish story as it deals with Annie and Cass's final sendoff. (That being said, I gave them eighteen years, which is a lot for shih tzus!).

-Kenzie is the least likely Mind Blind RO to want children. That being said, I really wanted to do a series of all the ROs interacting with theoretical offspring. If you romance Kenzie and want to imagine your Button as childfree, though, that works out perfectly as well!

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The girl ran down the driveway, her momentum gaining due to the downward slope. Her father caught her before she toppled forward and faceplanted on the pavement.

"Daddy, I brought it!" The girl held up a dented metal lunchbox that looked more suited for military deployment than a family excursion. Within, several packages of deli meat, two burger patties, and a large slice of carrot cake were prepared for today's guests of honor. Mari beamed to reveal several missing baby teeth, their newly crowning replacements jutting forward almost horizontally.

She'd would likely need braces in middle school, her father realized. She was growing up too fast; it felt like just yesterday that he and Ellery had to keep dog toys in an upper cupboard because baby Mari

preferred plastic bones to her pacifier. Locking the toys away hadn't helped—despite numerous confiscations, Mari had always managed to get her hands on another dog toy. Ferro had jokingly accused his goddaughter of witchcraft, but the truth came out after Ellery watched the baby monitor feed: Antigone and Cassandra, intent on taking care of the household's newest pup, had been pushing their toys through the bars of Mari's cradle.

"I did well, right, Daddy?"

Kent snapped back to the present at the note of uncertainty in his daughter's voice. Quickly erasing his inadvertent frown, he smiled back at her.

"You did great, Turtle," Kent said, trying not to chuckle at the way Mari's cheeks puffed up at the nickname. At seven years old, Mari considered herself too dignified for nicknames.

"I was *fast*," she complained. "You can't call me Turtle anymore."

"Turtles are speedy when they're underwater," Kent replied.

Mari squinted at him suspiciously. "Really?"

Kent nodded. "Just like in *Finding Nemo*."

Mari didn't seem completely convinced, but she gave up arguing.

"Annie and Cassie love the beach," Mari commented as he buckled her seatbelt. She sat in the middle of the backseat between two dog crates. Sticking her chubby hand through the gaps of each crate, she giggled as one of the dogs weakly licked her fingertips. "Right, Daddy?"

"That's right." Kent's chest tightened painfully as he recalled why they were making this trip.

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After a few minutes of hobbling after Mari, who slowed down to match the dog's pace, Cassandra flopped down on the grass. She rolled over with a plaintive whine, offering up her belly as tribute, the hair now grey instead of white. Mari knelt down to gently pet her, and Kent's heart expanded to the size of Utah at total adoration in Cass's watery brown eyes as she squinted happily at his daughter.

Antigone's favorite person had always been Ellery, but Cassandra had surprised everyone with how deeply the infamously hostile dog bonded with Mari. Kent wished, not for the first time, that at least one of the dogs could remain by his daughter's side.

A small *yip* emerged from crate still within the car: Annie, waking up from her nap.

"Does Annie want to go in the water now?" Mari asked innocently as he retrieved Antigone from the car. He looked over to find her holding a contented-looking Cass. Upon seeing her sister, Antigone let out a happy-but-wheezy bark.

"That depends on if you can help me with them," Kent told Mari. "Annie and Cassie aren't so good at swimming anymore."

"Because they're old, right?"

"That's right."

Mari nodded sagely. "Like you."

Kent's sputtered cough caused Annie to worriedly lick the back of his hand.

"Not like me," he corrected as they made their way down to the lakeside. "Annie and Cassie . . . they've lived a really long time for dogs."

Mari frowned. "But aren't you older than them?"

"Dogs and people don't age at the same rate, Turtle." Kent smiled sadly at his daughter. "Remember what we talked about the other day?"

Mari's lips flattened in a pout. At times when most children would scream or cry about life being unfair, Mari always shut down. On occasions such as this, she reminded Kent of himself before he'd met El. Thus, Kent recognized that his daughter's refusal to speak wasn't an indication of indifference. Far from it.

Kent shifted Antigone so that he was holding the shih tzu with only one arm. With his free hand, he wordlessly reached out and stroked the top of his daughter's head. Mari leaned into his touch, and her stoic expression shifted to sadness.

"Today is their goodbye party," she whispered.

Kent kept petting the top of her head. El had once accused him of treating their daughter like a dog, but Mari never seemed to mind. If anything, physical touch seemed to soothe her just as it did Antigone and Cassandra. Besides, finding the right thing to say was far harder than providing quiet affection.

When they reached the water, Mari stood up straighter. Kent's hand dropped back down to his side. When had his little girl grown so tall?

"We should act happy," Mari announced. "It's Annie and Cassie's party, so we should act happy."

Not just tall but mature as well. Despite his sorrow, Kent couldn't keep his lips from curving into a small but proud smile.

"Let's help them go swimming, then." He glanced at his daughter teasingly. "Maybe you should jump in the lake as well, and we'll see if Antigone or Cassandra can swim faster than a Turtle."

"Daaaaaaaad," Mari groaned in an exasperated tone that sounded more like it belonged to a thirteen-year-old than a seven-and-three-quarters-year-old.

She really was growing up too fast.

The pond was more a glorified puddle than a proper body of water: the diameter couldn't have been longer than a fishing line cast. It was shallow, though, and thus the perfect depth for Cassandra to wade straight in and attack a combatant lily pad with a ferocious growl. Mari plunged in after with a high-pitched giggle, and Kent rolled up his slacks so that he could hold Antigone in the water. Her paws paddled futilely, barely strong enough to create ripples, but Kent moved her around so that she felt like she was accomplishing something.

Kent had never been preoccupied with the notion of dignity, but even he had to admit that they were likely a ridiculous sight: a tall, shoeless man with his pants rolled up to his knees and hunched over in the middle of a puddle while helping a too-skinny shih tzu pretend to swim. Annie exhausted herself after only a few minutes, but her self-satisfied smile over "swimming" reminded Kent of his wedding day when she'd proudly gifted him with a squirrel carcass. (Despite Ellery's disgust, Antigone's heartfelt offering remained Kent's favorite wedding gifts. Far better than the blender gifted to them by his brother-in-law.)

As Cass and Mari frolicked in the water, Kent once again couldn't help but selfishly wish that at least one dog could stay behind. For Mari's sake. Still, the veterinarian had suggested letting Annie and Cass go together, and Kent had to reluctantly agree that it would be too cruel to force one dog to live through the pained confusion of losing her lifelong companion all for the sake of one or two additional months of low-quality existence. Deciding to release both at the same time was the most agonizing decision of Kent's life, not barring his decision to cut off his father, but he had no doubt that it was the right choice. For Annie and Cass, if not for his own heart.

Then again . . . Kent's gaze fell back upon Mari as she chased through the shallow water after Cass.

Kent's heart would recover, even after Antigone and Cassandra were no longer around to guard it.

* * * *

Annie snoozed fitfully on Kent's lap as he let his pants dry in the sunlight. After about half an hour of splashing around, Cass emerged from the pond as well. Mari followed, equally soaked, and both daughter and dog dried themselves off with full body shake. Mari lay down on her back beside Kent, and Cass sleepily curled up atop her belly.

Despite its minute size, Kent deemed that the pond had been perfect. Annie and Cass were too old and frail to brave Lake Michigan anymore; the wake of a kayak would've been enough to sweep them away. Kent felt old as well. Numerous gymnastic injuries in his youth had resulted in mild arthritis in mid-thirties. He could forget about it during Summer, but his joints always ached a bit in Winter. Today, despite it being unseasonably warm for Spring, his left elbow throbbed.

Added to that the increasing amount of gray hairs which Kent was finding in his hairbrush, it was no wonder that Mari's earlier comment about his age had hit home.

Granted, the ache in his elbow could also have been the result of spending all last night petting Annie. The old girl never slept for over an hour at a time these days, even with painkillers. She needed him or Ellery nearby or else she started whimpering. El had helped cover for Kent's shifts at Aeon so that he could take these last two weeks off work to be by her and Cass's side at home, but it still didn't feel like enough time.

It could never be enough time.

Enough, Kent sternly told himself. Stop moping. Today is supposed to be a good day. The best day.

He owed the girls as much. Without Annie and Cass barking their heads off over a decade ago, he would never have fallen in love with El. Without Ellery, Mari would never have entered his life.

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"Why do dogs have to die?" Mari asked, gazing at the clouds drifting lazily above.

Kent had been anticipating (and dreading) this question; he and Ellery had even practiced his response last night over the phone despite her being on assignment. He still wasn't sure whether his answer would be the *right* answer, but El said that honestly was the best path.

"Dogs get old," Kent said. "Eventually, they get so old that their bodies don't work. Annie and Cass are in a lot of pain, so the vet is going to help them die peacefully."

"Are you going to die?"

Exactly how ancient did his daughter believe him to be?

"Eventually," Kent conceded. "But not for a long, long time. You'll be old as well by the time that I die."

Mari fell silent as if unable to imagine such an absurd notion as adulthood. "Why do people have to get old, then?" she demanded. "Why do Annie and Cass have to be old?"

Shit. This, Kent hadn't practiced with Ellery.

"Dogs get old and die that new dogs can be born," he said after a moment of contemplation. "It's the same for people."

"What do you mean?" Mari's voice sounded stuffy.

"Think about it. What would the world be like if no one ever died?"

"Everyone would be happy," Mari sniffled. "Because everyone would still have their dogs."

"Maybe," Kent conceded. He saw her point: dogs deserved immortality. "But the Earth has been around for a long time. Can you imagine what it would be like if all the animals and people who ever existed had to live together?"

The silence stretched on so long that Kent glanced over to make sure that Mari hadn't fallen asleep. She hadn't, but her grey eyes, identical to his own, shone with unshed tears. She wouldn't cry, though, not until they got back home. Mari had said it herself: today was the dogs' party, so she would act happy for their sake.

"Dinosaurs would still be around," Mari finally announced with all the solemnity of a judiciary decision. "They'd eat everyone."

"Not just dinosaurs," Kent said, suppressing a chuckle. "Woolly mammoths and sabretooth tigers, too."

"Dodo birds!"

"And lots and lots of people. There'd be no space for anyone new. People would be stacked on top of each other."

"That's silly," Mari countered. "We could always colon—colonee—"

"Colonize?" That had been one of her school vocabulary words.

"Yeah! We could colonize new planets."

"We don't have the technology to do that yet," Kent said. "But a planet filled with dogs isn't a bad idea."

Both father and daughter fell quiet, equally enthralled by the prospect of such a paradise.

"Daddy?"

“Mm-hm?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Turtle.”

[Mind Blind Short Story: The Best Last Day \(Kenna Version\)](#)

[Feb 23, 2024](#)

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"Are you going to die?"

Exactly how ancient did her daughter believe her to be?

"Eventually," Kenna conceded. "But not for a long, long time. You'll be old as well by the time that I die."

Mari fell silent as if unable to imagine such an absurd notion as adulthood. "Why do people have to get old, then?" she demanded. "Why do Annie and Cass have to be old?"

Shit. This, Kenna hadn't practiced with Ellery.

"Dogs get old and die that new dogs can be born," she said after a moment of contemplation. "It's the same for people."

"What do you mean?" Mari's voice sounded stuffy.

"Think about it. What would the world be like if no one ever died?"

"Everyone would be happy," Mari sniffled. "Because everyone would still have their dogs."

"Maybe," Kenna conceded. She saw Mari's point: dogs deserved immortality. "But the Earth has been around for a long time. Can you imagine what it would be like if all the animals and people who ever existed lived together?"

The silence stretched on so long that Kenna glanced over to make sure that Mari hadn't fallen asleep. She hadn't, but her grey eyes, identical to Kenna's own, shone with unshed tears. She wouldn't cry, though, not until they got back home. Mari had said it herself: today was the dogs' party, so she would act happy for their sake.

"Dinosaurs would still be around," Mari finally announced with all the solemnity of a judiciary decision. "They'd eat everyone."

"Not just dinosaurs," Kenna said, suppressing a chuckle. "Woolly mammoths and sabretooth tigers, too."

"Dodo birds!"

"And lots and lots of people. There'd be no space for anyone new. People would be stacked on top of each other."

"That's silly," Mari countered. "We could always colon—colonee—"

"Colonize?" That had been one of her school vocabulary words.

"Yeah! We could colonize new planets."

"We don't have the technology to do that yet," Kenna said. "But a planet filled with dogs isn't a bad idea."

Both mother and daughter fell quiet, equally enthralled by the prospect of such a paradise.

"Mommy?"

"Mm-hm?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, Turtle."

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Vows Upon Skin \(Sally\).](#)

[Feb 26, 2024](#)

“Ouch!” You glare accusingly over your shoulder at Sally, who pulls back the tattoo pen from your skin and shrugs non-apologetically.

“I told you this would hurt,” she states.

“You compared it to kitten scratches!” It feels a little awkward arguing while laying on your stomach with your exposed rear in the air, but you can’t exactly move while the tattoo is still only partially completed. You and Sally settled on a stylized depiction of your and her initials, lovingly designed by your wife herself. So far, only the S had been inked.

“Well, it’s not as if I’ve personally ever got a tattoo before,” Sally says. “Now, hush and let me finish the outline. We’ll do shading and color next session.”

“Why did I agree to this?” you grumble, burying your head into the pillow of your and Sally’s shared bed. Sally decided that the bedroom was the best location, since it had furniture to lie down on and the large bay windows let in plenty of light.

“Because you love me,” Sally says. She lightly smacks your butt cheek (the one not being inked, thank god) with the flat of her palm. “And because this ass is mine, now.”

You let out a chuckle that ends in a yip as she resumes working.

It sounded so romantic at the time. When Sally revealed that the reason she’d been holed up in her studio was because she’d bought a tattoo gun and been practicing on pieces of fruit, you’d thought that her suggestion of DIY matching tattoos to commiserate your marriage was inspired. Wedding bands could slip on and off; tattoos lasted forever, a permanent part of your body just as Sally was and always had been a permanent part of your heart. Having those tattoos in a private place also made for a cheeky secret just between the two of you (quite literally, given your tattoo location, although Sally intended to do her own on her inner thigh for obvious accessibility logistics).

Fifteen minutes into the process, however, you were beginning to regret saying yes. A quick web search while Sally was preparing her tools revealed that the human butt cheek contained 2,500 nerves endings, and you could swear that your wife’s tattoo gun was stabbing each one.

“How much longer?” you grit out.

Sally lifts the tattoo gun. “Does it seriously hurt that bad?” she asks, her previously teasing tone lowering with genuine concern.

“It’s bearable,” you reply, although your skin still stings. “Just a little more painful than expected.”

“My poor baby.” A curtain of red curls drapes over your line of sight as Sally leans down to nuzzle your cheek. “I’ll try to be gentle.”

“Thanks.”

Truthfully, the pain is less severe than it was initially. Each prick of Sally’s linework feels like nails scratching a sunburn, but you no longer flinch every time the tattoo gun moves.

“I’ll make it up to you,” Sally promises in husky whisper as she starts on the letter of your first name.

It’s clear that she’s trying to distract you, but you’ve always been amenable to distraction. Luckily, your wife has a way of making you forget everything except her existence.

Hell, she even got you to agree to this tattoo.

“Make it up to me how?” you ask, lowering your own voice to match her seductive register.

The tattoo pen pauses, and you feel fingertips ticklishly trace around the curvature of your glut. Sally’s canvas, as it were.

“I’ll think of something,” Sally purrs. “You’ll need to be on top, though.”

The imagery created by her promise is engrossing enough that you almost don’t notice as she resumes inking your skin.

“We’ll have to go slow,” Sally continues. “I won’t be able to wrap my legs around you, given the fresh ink.” Her voice pauses, the silence filled only by your heavy breaths and the buzzing of the tattoo gun. The low intensity burn of pain has been replaced by heated anticipation, and you find yourself craving more.

“Then again,” Sally adds almost casually, “I’ve never been good at restraining myself. You might have to tie me down to make sure I don’t accidentally rub against anything *sensitive*.”

The pen lifts, and you feel a cool cloth wipe over your tender skin. Sally doesn’t pull it away, trailing the soft fabric down the lower curve of your ass until it brushes—just barely—against an even more sensitive area.

“I don’t know,” you choke out, your back arching in a shiver. “Rubbing sounds nice.”

Sally giggles. Her laugh is too high pitched and enthusiastic to be called sultry, but it still makes you want to turn over and drag her down with you into bed, half-finished tattoo be damned.

"A little pain with your pleasure?" Sally murmurs, and this time you're taken aback by how throaty and *aroused* her voice sounds. "Not something we've tried before, but I'm game to experiment."

She draws another steady line across your skin, adding a final flourish to the S, and the hairs on your forearms lift as if electrified. The pain isn't pleasurable, not exactly, but that you've begun viewing it as the precursor to a reward. The pain now makes you imagine pleasure, which gives rise to emotions which are . . . turbulent. Conflicted, to say the least.

"I think we may have just unlocked a new kink," you admit, only half joking.

Sally giggles again. "So long as I don't have to ink you with a new tattoo every time that we get frisky," she teases. "Our coworkers might start asking questions if you come back from our honeymoon with full body art."

You shift so that you're resting on your hip. Sally sets down her equipment, immediately sensing your intentions, and you grab the back of her neck and pull her down into a fiery kiss.

"No needles required for me to find you sexy," you tease after your lips part. It's not a line worthy of the Oscars (in fact, it borders on cringe), but your breathless words are enough to make Sally's pupils dilate. You grasp her chin so that she has no choice but to stare up at you, observing her reaction with primal satisfaction: her puffy kissed lips, her lust-glazed eyes, and delicate artist hands braced against your shoulders and trembling far too much for you two to resume the tattooing session anytime soon.

Sally's tongue darts out, wetting her lower lip in a gesture that speaks to both her eagerness and her nerves. Despite spending the majority of your lives together, some experiences are still new to you both. You two have a lifetime of exploration together, just as Sally promised in her self-written vows.

"What about just paint?" your wife suggests breathlessly. "The more I think about it, the more I want to tattoo *all* of you."

Your brain had been straying back to Sally's earlier comment about being tied up, but this works too. You lay back on the bed and spread your arms wide . . . only to wince as your fresh, still only half-completed, tattoo rubs against the bedsheets.

"Your butt!" Although referring to what was usually her favorite part of your anatomy, Sally's tone is more horrified than suggestive. "We forgot to bandage your butt!"

At Sally's exclamation, the smoldering mood between you dissipates like candy floss thrust into a cold fountain. You half-laugh, half-groan, and then turn back over onto your stomach so that Sally's artwork is once again exposed.

"Might as well finish the job," you say. "But next time . . ."

"Yes?" Sally's voice dips an octave as she tries to recover, unsuccessfully, the lost atmosphere.

"Next tattoo session, we use a numbing cream."

Mind Blind Saucy Side: The Note Inside Your Lunchbox (Grayson)

Feb 26, 2024

Dearest Love of My Life,

By now, you may not remember the offhand comment you made two weeks ago. We were watching that movie, which I can't recall the name of but was set in Vienna. You mentioned how romantic you found it that the two main characters exchanged love letters.

I'm sorry this letter took so long for me to compose. There were multiple drafts that I scrapped, because how can I encapsulate all that you mean to me within a few paragraphs? I finally gave up because that's impossible. A letter can only say the smallest fraction of everything that I feel towards you. Still, I hope this makes you smile on your lunchbreak.

Note scribbled in the margin: *Please don't read this around Nick. My prose got mildly enthusiastic towards the end.*

Although I'm not a poet, I did check out a few books from the library. I quickly realized that I'd never be able to write a love letter like the letters in those books, because most of the examples were written between lovers that didn't last. The love that poets talk about is like a dream, whereas loving you has made me feel more awake than I've ever been in my entire life. You're real, not a fantasy, and I love you all the more because I know you inside and out. Even the parts that you're ashamed of, the parts that you think are ugly, the parts that you're scared to acknowledge . . . I love them all because they're all a piece of you.

I didn't anticipate that I'd ever know someone as truly and deeply as I know you, or that I'd be lucky enough to experience being known that same way in return. My grandmother always joked that she and my grandfather had been together for so long that she could read his mind. I have a head start on that aspect of our relationship, but I know that I'll love you just as deeply when we're both in our eighties as I do right this moment. I wonder if by then I'll have solved you completely. Because even though you share your thoughts with me, I find myself caught off guard daily by the beauty of your mind and soul.

I love you.

I love the way you sigh as you settle into my arms at night, and the way that you nuzzle your nose against my chest. I love that it doesn't matter that you hog the comforter because you drape your whole body over me like a heated blanket (that is why I wear socks to bed, though, my love). I love those disgruntled koala noises you make when the alarm clock goes off in the morning, and I love how you bury your head beneath my chin as if you want me to protect you from the workday.

I especially love the mornings that we don't go to work, when the comforter gets shoved to the floor because you're on top of me instead of the blanket. I love the feel of you and the way we fit together so perfectly. I love that I hear your pleasure even when you bite your lips to keep yourself from crying out, and I love that I hear how much you love me as you drift off back asleep within my arms.

We're each other's refuge. The insecurities you sometimes feel when you're naked in front of me . . . I know it's unfair, but I'm also grateful every single time that you let me overhear those thoughts. Because there's nothing that I want more in life than to continue to reassure you that all those self-doubts of yours are tosh, because you are so much more amazing than you give yourself credit for. You make me smile more than anyone else in the world, and you taught me that it's okay to be vulnerable even though I was raised to believe that vulnerability was the same thing as weakness. It's not. I am who I am because I met you.

You have my heart. You have my everything.

Yours,

Gray

[MB Short Story: Sibling Rivalry \(Featuring Sally\)](#)

[Mar 21, 2024](#)

“Mother?”

Shit. Leo only called her ‘Mother’ when he was about to ask one of his infamously awkward questions. At least they weren’t in public this time: Leo’s last precocious bout of four-year-old curiosity had left Sally trying to explain her menstrual cycle in the personal care section of Whole Foods.

“What is it, sweetheart?” Sally asked.

Thankfully, Leo remained oblivious to the trepidation in his mother's voice. She and Ellery had always encouraged their son to be curious, and the last thing Sally wanted to do was quash Leo's willingness to ask them anything and everything. It wasn't Leo's fault that some of his questions (for example, "Mother, is Uncle Nicky's baby going to be adopted like me?") were better asked at in the privacy of home (instead of, for example, in the middle of said Uncle's wedding ceremony while Leo was acting as ring bearer, and his question left half the guests wondering if the bride was pregnant).

"Why don't I have a baby sister?"

After hearing "Mother" come from Leo's mouth (which admittedly sounded more like "Murder" due to his lisp), Sally had wisely refrained from taking another sip of her iced coffee. Thanks to this wise foresight, she avoided choking to death in her own living room.

"I'm sorry?" Sally said, just in case she'd heard wrong. God, she hoped that she'd heard wrong.

"Why don't I have a baby sister?" Leo repeated, confirming that, no, Sally wasn't lucky enough to be experiencing auditory hallucinations.

"Why are you asking about a baby sister?"

"Rian has a baby sister," Leo explained as if it should be obvious.

"Your friend from soccer?"

Leo nodded solemnly. "Rian got a baby sister for his fifth birthday."

. . . And Leo turned five next week. Sally was beginning to understand the impetus for her son's question. Unfortunately for Leo, she and Ellery couldn't summon a second child quite that quickly. Heck, it had taken Ellery over three weeks to hire a clown that didn't look like they'd crawled of a horror movie sewer for Leo's upcoming party.

"Rian and his new sister were born in the same month," Sally said, trying to stall for time. "That doesn't mean that she was his birthday gift."

Leo's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "But they brought her home for Rian's birthday!"

"Parents don't always choose what day they bring babies home," Sally said.

"Why?"

"Well, most babies spend nine months inside their mommy's tummy," Sally settled on. "But some babies spend less time and some babies spend a little more. Rian's sister must've decided to come out early because she didn't want to miss her big brother's birthday."

"I have a tummy mommy, too," Leo stated.

"You do," Sally confirmed. "She kept you safe while you grew from a little bean into a healthy baby. Then we got to take you home!"

Leo sucked in his pudgy cheeks—he made the exact same expression when thinking deeply about something as he did when sucking on a lemon wedge. Sally held her breath. She and El had always been open with Leo about the fact he was adopted, but they'd never delved too deeply into his biological parents as it was a closed adoption. Even if Leo asked about his own 'tummy mommy,' Sally couldn't provide him with any details because she simply didn't know. Leo should already know this, but there was no way of telling if he recalled their past conversations. Four-year-olds either had the memory of a lockbox or a sieve depending on their interest in a topic; Leo could remember verbatim the words to a song that he'd heard *once* about a baby squid bob-bob-bobbing in the ocean, but he'd also broken into tears yesterday because he'd forgotten how to put on his raincoat. Sleeves, according to Leo, were "turkey" (tricky).

"How do babies get in their mommy's tummy?" Leo asked, the question coming as a relief while simultaneously opening an entirely new can of worms.

Was age four too young for the birds and bees talk? Probably, especially for a kid as uninhibitedly loquacious as Leo. Sally had only recently convinced her son to stop asking strangers whether they had a vagina or a "normal peepee." (Convincing Leo that penises were not, in fact, the only valid form of genitalia had been a separate conversation. But, hey, at least her son was now better educated than most U.S. senators.)

Prior to Leo's adoption, Sally had inhaled copious guides on how to become that mythological cryptid known as the "perfect parent" (post Leo's adoption, she barely had time to paint let alone read). The standard answer suggested by such books ("some people have eggs, and other people have sperm, and that together makes a baby") would only lead to more "whys" and "whats" and "hows" in Leo's case. She really didn't feel up to giving an entire biology lesson fifteen minutes before bedtime.

She'd leave the 'where babies come from' conversation to Ellery. Maybe they'd make a family date of going to the library for some age-appropriate picture books, and maybe her and El would make out in the nonfiction section while Leo was at story time. No one ever visited the nonfiction section. Sally smiled as the perfect day began to unfold in her mind, only for her visualized make-out sesh with her spouse to be interrupted by Leo impatiently tugging on her paint-stained sleeve to remind her of his very pressing question.

Leo had asked two questions, however. Silently apologizing to her spouse, Sally decided to tackle the one which she currently found less intimidating: the subject of why he didn't have a baby sister.

"Do you want a baby sister?" she asked, turning the question back on her son.

Leo's brow furrowed as if he'd never considered that aspect of the scenario. "Rian says his sister cries a lot."

"Most babies do," Sally said.

“That sounds annoying.”

“It can be,” Sally agreed.

Leo nodded, and Sally suppressed a smirk at his inability to tie her comment to his own infancy.

“Also, Rian said that—” Leo lowered his voice to a scandalized whisper “—his sister still wears *diapers*.” He scrunched up his face with disgust, and it was all Sally could do to keep from laughing out loud.

“Most babies do,” she repeated, unable to stop the snicker that escaped.

“But Rian still said that he was okay keeping her.” Confusion scrunched up her son’s face like he was attempting to piece together a particularly tricky (or “turkey”) puzzle. “Rian said that he liked being a big brother.”

“Is that what you want?” Sally asked, genuinely curious. “To be a big brother?” She and Ellery hadn’t decided whether they wanted more than one child, but Leo’s opinion on the subject certainly mattered.

Leo bit the side of his thumb, chewing the cuticle until Sally clasped his small hands in her own. “You can tell me,” she encouraged, kneeling so that they were eye level. “I always want to hear about your feelings, sweetheart.”

Leo’s tense shoulders visibly relaxed at her words. He threw his arms around her neck in a fierce hug that left his feet dangling off the floor. “I don’t want to share you yet,” he declared, the words muffled by her shoulder. “I might want a little sister someday . . . but not for my birthday.”

Sally stroked her son’s hair and kissed the top of his sweaty head. Had the thought of a new sibling been a source of anxiety for him this entire conversation? Sally vaguely recalled feeling the same way once upon a time, when she’d begun to fully understand what it meant to be “adopted.” She’d been around Leo’s age, come to think of it. She’d worried that maybe, despite her dads’ constant love and affirmation that she was their entire world, she was ultimately replaceable because she wasn’t . . .

No, Sally was their real daughter. In all the ways that mattered.

Just like Leo was her real son.

Of all the things Leo had taught his mother, perhaps the most significant was that her own parents had never once lied. Which Sally had known, of course, but it still felt nice to have it confirmed. Because just like her dads, Sally couldn’t even begin to imagine adoring a child more deeply than she loved this too-serious, loose-lipped munchkin currently strangling her in his hug. With one last reassuring back pat, she pried Leo’s arms off her neck so that she could breathe again.

“We don’t plan on bringing home a little sibling for you any time soon,” she said. “You don’t need to worry about sharing me just yet.”

"I might change my mind, though," Leo said, ever pragmatic.

"That's fine." Sally pressed another kiss on the top of her son's head. How was it even possible to be this content with life? "For what it's worth, though, I think you'd make a great big brother."

"I'd be the best," Leo replied. "Even better than Rian!"

[Behind the Scenes Story: Situationship \(Featuring Reese and Andy\)](#)

[Mar 29, 2024](#)

The kid was amusing. Most potentials tried to ingratiate themselves with Reese during recruitment, so accustomed to be beaten down by Ments in their lives that they didn't even recognize how easily they offered Reese that same position. All the power, no mind control needed. It was good being on top.

Wiseman was . . . different. Lippy, almost to the point of being combative. Likeable, even charming. They never flinched, not even when Reese caught them red handed in her office. Reese didn't blame Wiseman's curiosity—quite the contrary. It was laudable to thoroughly research an ally before the final handshake. For that same reason, Reese had Caleb combing through the past five years of Wiseman's and Zarneki's online histories. If Wiseman wasn't exactly who they claimed to be, Andy's cousin would find out. There was a reason that Reese kept the twerp around.

"You like them."

Reese leaned back in her chair and continued to stare at the window, declining to give Andy the satisfaction of turning around to face her.

"I told you to knock," she said without venom. Andy never knocked on her office door when it was just the two of them in the house, a luxury which Reese protested with only superficial indignation. Permitting Andy such small liberties let the boy cling to the illusion that their relationship still resembled something akin to a partnership.

Andy, as expected, ignored her performative chiding. "Wiseman," he said. "You like them."

Reese could hear him pacing back and forth on her silk carpet (a gift from Jeri, sweet thing). She felt a spike of annoyance at Andy's inability to stand still, as well as the obvious note of petulant jealousy in his voice.

"What's not to like?" she asked mockingly, still not turning around her chair. The view of the woods was lovely at dusk. "The errant offspring of Justice and Hope, come to seek succor in the bosom of

Vengeance.” That was a good line, poetic yet menacing. She’d add it to her notepad once Andy left.

“You think they’re genuine, then.” Although his words lifted in tone at the end like a question, Reese recognized them for what they were: a condemnation. Andy was second guessing her judgement.

Reese didn’t like that. Boris had already expressed discontent with her decision to claim responsibility for Aeon’s bombing; she couldn’t afford to have Andy forgetting his place. Perhaps she’d allowed him too much leeway lately, not knocking being a prime example. She and Andy had history, and his past loyalty had earned him a special position among her disciples. But he was dangerously close to letting that status go to his head.

Dominus dedit, Dominus abstulit.

“Wiseman is genuine as any of us ever are,” Reese said with a light laugh as her fingers clenched around her wineglass. She didn’t like the taste of wine, never had, but having an expensive vintage in hand gave Vengeance’s congregation something which to aspire.

“I didn’t think you’d trust someone from Aeon that easily.” Andy was pouting. Did he truly feel so threatened that Wiseman had caught Reese’s attention? Poor insecure pet. Despite Reese’s initial irritation, his persistent pettiness was reassuring. It was proof of Andy’s devotion to Vengeance, to her. Since she still hadn’t turned her chair, Reese allowed her lips to curve in a contented smirk.

“Wiseman intrigues me,” Reese answered honestly. “The recordings that Caleb found proves that Wiseman planted the bomb and yet . . .”

She swirled the wine in her glass, bracing herself for the bitter sip she’d take once she finally turned around. Control came down to timing and presentation; Andy needed to earn her full attention first.

“Something about Wiseman seems off,” Andy finished, much to Reese’s annoyance. She’d paused mid-sentence for dramatic effect, and his interjection spoiled the buildup.

Enough was enough. Her dog clearly required additional training.

The swivel chair screeched in protest as Reese spun abruptly around. In one smooth motion, she thrust her wineglass forward, the liquid splashing forth. Two thousand a bottle, this vintage. Droplets trickled down Andy’s cheeks like tears of blood (another line for Reese’s notebook) as he stared at her with the wounded eyes of a kicked puppy.

“That was uncalled for,” Andy said stiffly without bothering to wipe his face. Despite his forced stoicism, his fists clenched, and his cheeks flushed almost as red as the wine.

Reese stood and leaned over the desk so that she could grasp his chin. She tugged him roughly forward, hearing his breath hitch once their lips were almost close enough to touch.

“Stop questioning my judgement,” she ordered in a steely whisper.

Andy nodded dumbly, his eyes still glued to her red lips. Reese smirked. The idiot hadn't inhaled since she'd grabbed him. Releasing Andy's chin, she tenderly stroked his wet cheek.

"Good boy," she said. "You're the only one who I trust."

[MB Short Story: Eclipse](#)

[Apr 30, 2024](#)

Warning: Contains Mega-Spoilers for Vengeance Ending

"Not gonna lie," Sally said, "I thought it would be bigger."

Glitch's head swiveled towards her with an expression that was (one would assume) incredulous beneath his dark shades. "It's the *sun*," Glitch said. "Babygirl, this is as big as it gets."

"Clearly, you've never seen my—"

Sally's hand slammed over Nick's mouth before he could finish the sentence.

"I *know* that the sun is ginormous," Sally replied to Glitch, ignoring Nick's muffled protests beneath her palm. "But I still thought it would look bigger. I read an article this morning that had photos of the 2024 eclipse. It looked bigger."

"Mmm-mmm-mmumphm," Nick said from beneath Sally's palm, which probably translated into some sophisticated joke like "that's what she said."

"That's the incredible thing about cameras," Glitch snarked. "The zoom function."

"I hate you," Sally retorted without (or at least only a tiny bit of) venom.

Glitch lifted his eclipse glasses upwards an inch to wink at her. "Keep telling yourself that, babygirl."

Sally let out a low growl. "I told you to stop calling me that. No one talks like that anymore."

"You did tell me to stop calling you that," Glitch acknowledged blithely, "which is why it's your permanent nom de guerre."

Sally groaned. "You did something obnoxious again, didn't you?"

Glitch smirked and lifted a finger to his lips. "Not. Telling."

Ushering his two subordinates out of the way of another group of eclipse-watchers who were walking towards one of the park benches, Gray frowned with stern disapproval at Glitch's cryptic comment.

"Parker, did you tamper with the database again?"

"Let's just say that someone is no longer listed as 'Delphi' in Unity's database."

"Now I *really* hate you," Sally said.

"Buy me an iced mocha on the walk back to the office and I'll consider changing it back," Glitch says.

"That's blackmail."

"It's also grounds for dismissal." Gray sighed in an exhausted-but-used-to-it tone. "Fix it before admin notices."

Glitch's nose scrunched with displeasure. "Fine. Clarebear never did learn how to take a joke."

"Mmm-mmm-mmpbh," Nick commented.

Sally lifted her hand off his mouth. "What was that?"

Despite finally being permitted to talk, Nick hesitated. His expression turned conflicted, clear eyes turning cloudier than the sky overhead at which the four Aeon employees were all squinting to view the midday eclipse during their lunchbreak. Correctly interpreting the reason behind the sudden shift in his mood, Sally's smile fell.

"Spit it out," she ordered. "We can't keep pretending she's still here."

"Button called Clarence that as well," Nick said after a long pause. "I didn't realize that she'd learned the nickname from Glitch."

"Ah," Glitch said, and no one else added any further commentary to the situation.

Nick put on his pair of eclipse shades (given out at Aeon's front desk to all employees) and gazed upwards, where the near complete eclipse had transformed the sun into a hollow ring of red.

"Has there been any news?" Sally asked, blinking to hold back tears. It hurt to stare straight at the sun for so long, even with the glasses. That was the only reason her eyes suddenly stung.

Grayson cast a worried look over at Nick before responding. "Tobias Zarneki still claims not to know the whereabouts of his son," Gray says. "Sohvi gleaned that he was lying, but there's not much UCRT can do legally other than continue our investigation."

Glitch's clenched fists betrayed the sardonic smile which he plastered on. "When y'all do find Kent, tell him that those hellhounds of his are driving me insane," he said. "Antigone has barely eaten for the past three months since . . ."

"Since they went missing," Sally filled in.

"Button didn't go missing," Nick corrected softly. "She left."

"You don't know that for sure," Sally argued. "I know her last communication seemed incriminating, but —"

Nick laughed bitterly. "Incriminating? It was practically a confession."

"Not necessarily," Sally insisted. "EI could've been coerced, or decided to go undercover, or--"

"Don't forget, I know *everything* about my sister," Nick interrupted. "Which is how I know she left." He laughed again, a broken, strangled noise that wasn't really a laugh at all. "It's also why she left. Does that count as irony?"

"Only according to Alanis Morissette," Glitch quipped. When no one chuckled, he sighed. "Tough crowd."

Sally lay her hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, babyboy," she said with forced cheer. "Kent will be back soon enough to laugh at your jokes."

"Will he, though?" Glitch practically spat out the words. "UCRT has been useless at locating him thus far. Rosy said that he found a lead, but then he up and disappeared as well. Everything's gone to shit, and we're just standing around staring straight into the sun with a bunch of people who think the world is gonna end in twenty minutes because of celestial shadows. Fuck that. Maybe the world has already ended."

Silently, Sally wrapped her arms around him. Glitch's body sagged into her hug with a choking sound halfway between a laugh and a sob.

Grayson, who'd been observing the scene with a guilty expression, spoke up. "Like I said, there's not much that UCRT can legally act upon when it comes to investigating the Mayor. Officially, our hands are tied." He lowered his voice. "Unofficially, Peace was able to detect that Kent is still in the city, even if she hasn't pinpointed his location yet. We'll get him back, Parker. I promise."

"What about EI?" Sally asked.

Grayson looked down at the grass, and Glitch stiffened in Sally's arms. Only Nick spoke up, his voice hoarse and mirthless.

"Ellery *left*," Nick said. "Voluntarily. Willingly. With Vengeance. Stop deluding yourself, Salome. She's never coming back."

[Apr 30, 2024](#)

"You've misbehaved. And now you want mercy? *Pathetic.*"

"Oooh, daddy, I love it when you tell me how naughty I've been."

"Hold up," Ambrose says, his hand withdrawing from your backside. "I agreed to spank you. I did not agree to . . . *that.*"

"You're adorable when you sputter," you purr, wiggling your rear in the air.

"I'm serious." Ambrose tugs the blanket up so that your lower half is covered. "That word makes me think of your parents. It is . . ." You feel him shudder, and a note of unadulterated horror creeps into his voice. "Do not misunderstand: I love you. Deeply and intensely. However, being reminded of your family is the *opposite* of arousing."

You roll over on the bed with a pout that quickly disappears after seeing Ambrose's expression. More than revolted, your lover looks *guilty*. No wonder, if your casual name-calling reminded him of the riot act that your father shouted at him last family dinner (which had gone relatively peaceful compared to past attempts). A wave of sadness crests over you at the realization that Ambrose still clings to guilt over his past actions . . .

And yet his woebegone expression—over being called "*daddy*," of all things—is kinda hilarious.

You clamp your lips together before a giggle can escape, but Ambrose recognizes your amusement.

"It's not funny," he says, scowling.

"It's a little bit funny." It's a lot funny.

Ambrose crosses his arms over his wide chest, and you can't help but ogle the way his pectorals bulge with the movement. His scowl deepens.

"Remember our conversation about regarding turnoffs?" Ambrose asks. "This—to quote the way you phrase it—'gives me the ick.'"

"Alright," you agree readily. Being playful is only fun if both parties are enjoying the game, after all. "No more daddy." You put a finger to your lips and tap thoughtfully, smugly noticing the way that Ambrose's gaze follows where you point.

"What should I call you instead, then?" you drawl. "Teacher?"

He breathes out a sigh that's almost a laugh, his eyes glinting with resigned amusement. 'Teacher' is a future option, then, but amusement isn't the same thing as lust. You want to call Ambrose something that drives him as wild as he drives you whenever he moans your first name. You need a word that will set him on fire.

"What about sir?" Might as well start with the basics.

Ambrose's gaze darkens, and he reaches out to cusp your chin. "Better," he says, giving you a swift but fierce kiss. "Although it's unlike you to be polite."

"True. Maybe we'll save that one for your birthday," you tease. "My lord?"

His nose crinkles with disdain.

"That's a no, then." You stick out your tongue. "I'll sell you on the Pride and Prejudice roleplay someday."

"Darcy wasn't a lord."

You moan and throw yourself backwards onto the pillows, fanning yourself as if in danger of fainting. "Bless my garters. I do so love it when you talk literary to me, darling."

"Roleplaying confuses me," Ambrose confesses with a small laugh as he leans over your body and trails scorching kissing down your chest.

"Confuses you?" The question emerges as a distracted gasp.

"Yes," Ambrose says. "Why would I ever want to pretend that you're someone else?"

His point of view is so unexpectedly sweet that you reward him with a downwards stroke of your hand, starting at his navel and ending with a motion that has him burying his head between the curve of your neck and shoulder and biting down.

"You're *mine*," he growls, so low and primitive and gutturally that you immediately forget all of the other nicknames you were planning to test out.

Ambrose smirks at your reaction, sensing that he now has the upper hand, and you rebel at his cockiness because damn it, he *always* has the upper hand.

"You're not my husband yet," you counter, and Ambrose stills. You glance into his eyes, curious as to the reason for his sudden motionlessness, and discover his pupils have expanded so much that his dark brown eyes appear almost completely black.

"*That*, I like," he whispers.

"Being called husband?"

With an approving moan, Ambrose lowers himself atop you. “Again.”

“Hubby,” you joke, never one to lose your sense of humor even as Ambrose’s intensity threatens to steal away all rational thought. “Hubs. My mister. The old ball’n’chain.”

“Stop teasing,” Ambrose demands. He does something clever with his fingers, and you can no longer think of synonyms for spouse.

“Husband!” you pant. “You’re not my husband.”

“Yet,” he says. “Don’t forget the ‘yet’.”

[MB Saucy Side: Don't Call Her Mommy \(Featuring Ambrosia\)](#)

[Apr 30, 2024](#)

“You’ve misbehaved. And now you want mercy? *Pathetic.*”

“Oooh, mommy, I love it when you tell me how naughty I’ve been.”

“Hold up,” Ambrosia says, her hand withdrawing from your backside. “I agreed to spank you. I did not agree to . . . *that.*”

“You’re adorable when you sputter,” you purr, wiggling your rear in the air.

“I’m serious.” Ambrosia tugs the blanket up so that your lower half is covered. “That word makes me think of your parents. It is . . .” You feel her shudder, and a note of unadulterated horror creeps into her voice. “Do not misunderstand: I love you. Deeply and intensely. However, being reminded of your family is the *opposite* of arousing.”

You roll over on the bed with a pout that quickly disappears after seeing Ambrosia’s expression. More than revolted, your lover looks *guilty*. No wonder, if your casual name-calling reminded her of the riot act that your mother shouted at her last family dinner (which had gone relatively peaceful compared to past attempts). A wave of sadness crests over you at the realization that Ambrosia still clings to guilt over her past actions . . .

And yet her woes gone expression—over being called “*mommy*,” of all things—is kinda hilarious.

You clamp your lips together before a giggle can escape, but Ambrosia recognizes your amusement.

"It's not funny," she says, scowling.

"It's a little bit funny." It's a lot funny.

Ambrosia crosses her arms over her chest, and you can't help but ogle the way her breasts are enhanced by the movement. Her scowl deepens.

"Remember our conversation about regarding turnoffs?" Ambrosia asks. "This—to quote the way you phrase it—'gives me the ick.'"

"Alright," you agree readily. Being playful is only fun if both parties are enjoying the game, after all. "No more mommy." You put a finger to your lips and tap thoughtfully, smugly noticing the way that Ambrosia's gaze follows where you point.

"What should I call you instead, then?" you drawl. "Teacher?"

Ambrosia breathes out a sigh that's almost a laugh, her eyes glinting with resigned amusement. 'Teacher' is a future option, then, but amusement isn't the same thing as lust. You want to call Ambrosia something that drives her as wild as she drives you whenever she moans your first name. You need a word that will set her on fire.

"What about ma'am?" Might as well start with the basics.

Ambrosia's gaze darkens, and she reaches out to cusp your chin. "Better," she says, giving you a swift but fierce kiss. "Although it's unlike you to be polite."

"True. Maybe we'll save that one for your birthday," you tease. "My lady?"

Her nose crinkles with disdain.

"That's a no, then." You stick out your tongue. "I'll sell you on the Pride and Prejudice roleplay someday."

"Elizabeth wasn't a lady."

You moan and throw yourself backwards onto the pillows, fanning yourself as if in danger of fainting. "Bless my garters. I do so love it when you talk literary to me, darling."

"Roleplaying confuses me," Ambrosia confesses with a small laugh as she leans over your body and trails scorching kissing down your chest.

"Confuses you?" The question emerges as a distracted gasp.

"Yes," Ambrosia says. "Why would I ever want to pretend that you're someone else?"

Her point of view is so unexpectedly sweet that you reward her with a downwards stroke of your hand, starting at her navel and ending with a circular motion that has her burying her head between the curve

of your neck and shoulder and biting down.

“You’re *mine*,” she growls, so low and primitive and gutturally that you immediately forget all of the other nicknames you were planning to test out.

Ambrosia smirks at your reaction, sensing that she now has the upper hand, and you rebel at her cockiness because damn it, she *always* has the upper hand.

“You’re not my wife yet,” you counter, and Ambrosia stills. You glance into her eyes, curious as to the reason for her sudden motionlessness, and discover her pupils have expanded so much that her dark brown eyes appear almost completely black.

“*That*, I like,” she whispers.

“Being called wife?”

With an approving moan, Ambrosia lowers herself atop you. “Again.”

“Wifey,” you joke, never one to lose your sense of humor even as Ambrosia’s intensity threatens to steal away all rational thought. “My missus. The old ball’n’chain.”

“Stop teasing,” Ambrosia demands. She does something clever with her fingers, and you can no longer think of synonyms for spouse.

“Wife!” you pant. “You’re not my wife.”

“Yet,” she says. “Don’t forget the ‘yet’.”

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

[May 31, 2024](#)

The woman’s boobs are . . . if not impossible at very least anatomically improbable. Despite the exaggerated bounce of her unlikely-sized bosom as she runs through a dense forest, the miniscule strip of fabric half-covering her nipples never slips.

You glance between your boyfriend and his ultrawide computer screen, your brows arching.

“Do I want to know?” you ask.

Instead of looking sheepish over his inability to (or deliberate choice not to) minimize his screen in time, Glitch grins at you. “Remember the old game that I showed you yesterday?”

You nod.

“Welllllllll,” Glitch says, drawing out the word to build anticipation. “It has mods. Spicy, oh-so-*scandalous* mods. Some date all the way back from 2011.”

You nod again, not quite sure why this revelation has made him so excited.

Glitch looks put out by your lack of reaction. “This is digital sex archaeology!” he exclaims, nodding his chin towards the screen where She-Of-The-Unlikely-Breasts is running/jiggling her way down a cobblestone road. “It’s a record of our forefathers’ deviant desires that we can play through ourselves. I’m reliving history, here.”

Your nose scrunches with dismay as you do your best *not* to think about the phrase “deviant desires” in association with either your forefather or foremother. Glancing back at the screen, you see that the buxom barbarian whom Glitch is controlling is now fighting a giant who . . . Oh. That’s not a club that the giant is hitting her with.

A shocked laugh escaped your lips. “Why is it so *pixilated*?”

Glitch’s laughter joins yours. “This was the only version of the mod that I could find still on the web.”

“It’s censored.”

“Well, I got the mod off a Japanese server,” Glitch says. “It was either done as a joke, or laws were stricter back then.”

“Most people walk in on their significant other watching VR porn. This is . . .”

“Significantly hotter, I’m aware.” Glitch bats his eye lashes. “My archaeological bent makes me a modern Indiana Jones, minus all the collateral artifact damage. Don’t worry, darling, the answer is yes: I’ll wear the hat and whip.”

You lean over your boyfriend’s shoulder, drawing in close so that your breath tickles his ear. “Professor Jones?” you purr, trying not to giggle when Glitch shivers at your words.

“Yes, er . . .” He trails off, eyes no longer on his screen. “Pupil, I guess? Indi was a professor, right?”

“He was,” you confirm. “But you should pay attention, Professor Jones.”

“Oh, I am definitely paying attention,” Glitch swears, lifting your hand to his lips and pressing a fervent

kiss upon your knuckles.

You run the hand that he isn't holding down his chest, down until you can pull up the edge of his orange hoodie and lightly graze your nails against the exposed sliver of skin.

Glitch throws his head back with a low groan. "Utterly rapt."

This position, with him seated and you standing behind him, reminds you of your first kiss at the coffee shop years ago. Your locations are reversed, but that doesn't matter, because you're in the home that you share with the person whom you love the most. You lean down.

Glitch's lips are warm and pliant, and the world is perfect.

"Professor Jones?" you ask after the kiss ends.

"Mmmhmmm?" Glitch stares up at you adoringly, his gaze heavy-lidded and glazed.

"Your damsel is dead."

You point to the screen, where the camera is circling over the collapsed body of the buxom barbarian. The physics of her breasts have glitched, creating bobbing flesh-colored streaks over the screen.

"I suppose that's game over," Glitch says, not sounding at all disappointed. He smirks at you. "Should we play something else?"

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

[May 31, 2024](#)

The woman's boobs are . . . if not impossible at very least anatomically improbable. Despite the exaggerated bounce of her unlikely-sized bosom as she runs through a dense forest, the miniscule strip of fabric half-covering her nipples never slips.

You glance between your girlfriend and her ultrawide computer screen, your brows arching.

"Do I want to know?" you ask.

Instead of looking sheepish over her inability to (or deliberate choice not to) minimize her screen in time,

Glitch grins at you. “Remember the old game that I showed you yesterday?”

You nod.

“Welllllll,” Glitch says, drawing out the word to build anticipation. “It has mods. Spicy, oh-so-*scandalous* mods. Some date all the way back from 2011.”

You nod again, not quite sure why this revelation has made her so excited.

Glitch looks put out by your lack of reaction. “This is digital sex archaeology!” she exclaims, nodding her chin towards the screen where She-Of-The-Unlikely-Breasts is running/jiggling her way down a cobblestone road. “It’s a record of our forefathers’ deviant desires that we can play through ourselves. I’m reliving history, here.”

Your nose scrunches with dismay as you do your best *not* to think about the phrase “deviant desires” in association with either your forefather or foremother. Glancing back at the screen, you see that the buxom barbarian whom Glitch is controlling is now fighting a giant who . . . Oh. That’s not a club that the giant is hitting her with.

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“It’s censored.”

“Well, I got the mod off a Japanese server,” Glitch says. “It was either done as a joke, or laws were stricter back then.”

“Most people walk in on their significant other watching VR porn. This is . . .”

“Significantly hotter, I’m aware.” Glitch bats her eye lashes. “My archaeological bent makes me a modern Indiana Jones, minus all the collateral artifact damage. Don’t worry, darling, the answer is yes: I’ll wear the hat and whip.”

You lean over your girlfriend’s shoulder, drawing in close so that your breath tickles her ear. “Professor Jones?” you purr, trying not to giggle when Glitch shivers at your words.

“Yes, er . . .” she trails off, eyes no longer on her screen. “Pupil, I guess? Indi was a professor, right?”

“He was,” you confirm. “But you should pay attention, Professor Jones.”

“Oh, I am definitely paying attention,” Glitch swears, lifting your hand to her lips and pressing a fervent kiss upon your knuckles.

You run the hand that she isn't holding down her chest, down until you can pull up the edge of her orange hoodie and lightly graze your nails against the exposed sliver of skin.

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"Your damsel is dead."

You point to the screen, where the camera is circling over the collapsed body of the buxom barbarian. The physics of her breasts have glitched, creating bobbing flesh-colored streaks over the screen.

"I suppose that's game over," Glitch says, not sounding at all disappointed. She smirks at you. "Should we play something else?"

[UCRT Short Story: Thoughtus Interruptus \(Warning: Mega Spoilers\)](#)

[May 31, 2024](#)

"Shut up," Nick muttered under his breath. "Shut up, shut up, shut up."

uh yeah we're gonna have a problem since I'm into aubrey as well

Nick raced down the locker-lined hallway like a bullet down a barrel, his eyes affixed on the Emergency Exit door that promised salvation *oh shit did we have homework*. Beyond the door lay the parking garage, where Nick's car was parked in a faculty spot because he'd overheard Mr. McAllister, his calculus teacher, planning to call in sick today in order to spend the day with his own sister-in-law *milk onions almond butter*. Nick wouldn't have chosen to learn about his teacher's semi-incestuous infidelity, but Nick didn't get to choose a lot of things in his life *so borrrrrrrrrred*. All things considered, it was only

fair that he leverage his permanent lack of autonomy for better parking.

can't forget the almond butter

Ten steps until escape. If the fire alarm sounded when he opened the door, at least it's shrill scream would still be quieter than all the voices

my desk wobbles and my head

whoa am I her type

jamie should join

earned more doing pizza delivery in college

aubrey smiled at me

aubrey totally smiled at me

then again jamie can be kinda a buzzkill

should I smile back or

why are we being tested on this when an app can just do it

feels like it's going to explode

that smile was for me right

shrieking in his head.

Nick frequently wondered what it would feel like to live a life of silence and not always hear the constant murmuring *ugh not jamie*. Most days, it was all meaningless white noise that Nick could ignore—when hundreds of people were chattering in his head at the same time, he couldn't really hear what any single person was saying unless he really focused.

Some days, however, were like today. *REMEMBER ALMOND BUTTER*. Days when, for whatever reason (usually lack of sleep), the voices sounded louder and felt more insistent, and other people pressed and pressed and *pressed* at the edges of Nick's mind until his own thoughts were buried beneath a migraine that threatened to shatter his skull.

There was only one thing Nick could do on days like today, other than escape. His guitar was unfortunately in the shop getting a tune-up, which meant that he had to resort to more primitive

measures. Nick took a deep breath.

“OHHHHHHHHH!” The echo crashed off the parking garage’s concrete walls and temporarily drowned out shopping lists and teenage crushes. “Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?”

He sang first in English, then in Spanish, working his way through all twenty-seven versions that he knew of the song (the cartoon had officially been translated to sixty, but Nick’s brain, multi-talented though it was, still had limits). He was halfway through the chorus in Finnish when his car pulled out of the lot and onto Wabash Street.

Downtown Chicago was never quiet. There were too many people, but Nick found that there was safety in numbers. As he drove into the city center, the ambient voices that he heard went from numbering in the hundreds to the thousands. So many thoughts that it was impossible to pick up any, and Nick breathed a sigh of relief, his death grip on the steering wheel gradually loosening, as the constant *drip-drip-drip* trickle of other people’s consciousness transformed into a waterfall. Waterfalls made for pleasant background noise, the kind of sound that people set their earbuds to in the library in order to drown out the conversation of the “study group” seated at a nearby table. Monks meditated under waterfalls, or so cartoons would have Nick believe. The important thing was that Nick could hear his own thoughts—ironically because there were too many people talking inside his mind to hear anyone except himself.

It was as close to silence as Nick ever came.

I HATE IT HERE I HATE THIS STUPID SCHOOL THIS STUPID WORLD WHY DID I THINK THAT WHY DID HE TELL EVERYONE I HATE MY LIFE MY BRAIN MY STUPID BRAIN EVERYTHING ABOUT ME IS BROKEN THEY ALL KNOW IT THEY ALL KNOW EVERYTHING I HATE EVERYTHING

A stream of consciousness that wasn’t his own flooded Nick’s mind, an internal voice so familiar that he knew it almost better than his own. Button’s elementary school was several miles north of his prep school, a distance that was usually outside of his resting brainrange. But that never mattered when his sibling was in distress. Nick didn’t know whether Button’s thoughts somehow traveled farther when they grew upset, or if his ability to hear them outside his normal range instead indicated some sort of constant subconscious vigil on his own part.

It didn’t matter. His sibling needed help.

Tires screeched as Nick pulled an illegal u-turn which earned him several middle fingers flung out car windows, as well as a stream of mental profanity from a passing white sedan so loud that it momentarily drowned out even Button’s distraught thoughts. Nick wasn’t quite sure what a “drongo” was or how his reckless driving qualified him as one, but the thinker’s timbre hadn’t been complimentary. He’d look up the word later.

Once stopped at a red light, Nick porch-visited his father. “Porch-visit” was a phrase coined by his dad to describe the process of letting your thoughts connect to someone else; John claimed that his telepathy, when used to communicate with others, felt like “stepping outside my mental house and hollering across the yard at my neighbor mowing his lawn.” It didn’t quite feel that way for Nick—more like his mind was a docked boat finally being untethered. Nick figured that had to do with just how far his thoughts could float.

He located his father with ease. John was in his office, shuffling through paperwork and gnawing on a beef jerky stick—a high sodium treat that Nick’s mother had expressly banned due to John’s already high blood pressure. Seeing such a rule break on any other day, Nick would’ve taken the opportunity to tease his father and threaten to tattletale. But Button was in trouble.

John straightened from his slouch over his desk, shoving the beef jerky beneath his paperwork in effort to belatedly hide it from his son’s telemetric view.

Shouldn’t you be paying attention in class right now? John thought.

Button needed a break, Nick replied, deciding to forgo mentioning his own freak out. No need for his dad to have to worry about both kids instead of only one.

John heaved a mental sigh. *You can’t always drive to the rescue.*

Nick could and would, but he was careful not to let his dad overhear that particular thought. *I’m going to pick them up from school early today,* he projected instead. *Maybe grab blizzards at Dairy Queen if Button feels up to it.*

I’ll call the school and let them know you have my permission for pick up, John replied. He never worried about his kids missing class so long as it never affected their grades. Thus far, it never had, despite numerous absences. John attributed his children’s brilliance to his wife’s genetics and the fact that he’d played Classic Rock to them as babies.

Thanks, Dad.

And Nick?

Yeah?

I’m proud of you.

[Delivery for the Damned Sneak Peak](#)

[May 31, 2024](#)

There's something wrong in these lands. Something deep and dark, that gnaws at your bones like arthritis on a rainy day. Every step forward sinks your boots a half-inch lower into the mud, but you know not to look down. *Never look down.*

Although you can't glance at the ground, you've delivered to this address enough times to know that there's a puddle in front of the rickety plank stairway leading up to the even ricketier wooden porch. The puddle is too deep to be walked through but too wide to jump over. The only way to cross is to pay the toll.

Reaching into your T.H.A.B. mail satchel, you take out a zipped plastic baggy. Within is today's offering:

CHOICE:

#A half-eaten digestive biscuit from morning tea, crushed to teeny-tiny bite-sized crumbles.

*set tealover true

Pixies love sugar. And you love tea, so always have a surplus of biscuits.

#A couple blueberries which I picked off the bush growing in my balcony garden.

Organic, of course. Pesticides are toxic to Pixies.

*set garden true

*set biscuit "fruit"

#A few stale pieces of my hellhound's kibble.

*set hellhound true

*set biscuit "kibble"

You're not quite sure what the ingredients are in your pet's food (nor do you want to know, given the way it burnt through a plastic food bowl before you switched to ceramic). Nutritional value probably doesn't matter since the Pixies use it as ammo for their slingshots.

Without looking down (*NEVER* look down), you empty out the baggie over where the puddle should be.

A wave of freezing water sloshes over your right ankle, soaking your sock and settling down to your sole. The $\{biscuit\}$ has been accepted.

You step on top of the puddle.

It holds.

Congratulations! You now only have a five percent chance of drowning. (Pixies are capricious like that.)

[Mind Blind Backstory: The Racecar and The Snowplow](#)

[Jun 30, 2024](#)

“Justice is a liability.”

Grayson leaned back in his seat across from Adsila Branham’s oversized desk. His chair, he noticed with wry amusement, was several inches lower than Adsila’s own but still not enough to compensate for the height difference between the tall man and petite woman. Yet despite physically dwarfing his current boss and former instructor, Gray always felt like a schoolboy in danger of his knuckles being rapped whenever Adsila summoned him to her office.

“Unity plans to announce Nick as leader of The Ideals at tomorrow’s press conference,” Gray said, keeping his voice steady even as his heartbeat began to race. “You agreed to his promotion.”

“That was before Detroit,” Adsila said.

“Our mission in Detroit was a success.”

“On paper. You and I both know that he made the wrong call.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Gray leaned back in the too-small chair. “Ingenuity’s injury wasn’t Nick’s fault.”

Ingenuity’s injury. Such a blithely alliterative way of describing the two bullets which Mercedes took to her chest.

“Justice told her that the building was empty,” Adsila said.

“The building was vacant when Nick scanned it,” Gray replied. “All we knew at the time was that Alberici had once used it as a hideout. Mercedes was supposed to look for psychic traces of where he might’ve gone next—not even Diligence predicted that he’d return.” *And Yuki is a fucking Precog*, he added mentally. *Just how many powers are you expecting Nick to have?*

“Justice still sent her in without backup.”

“Mercedes went in alone because the rest of us were following up on alternative leads,” Grayson snapped. “Nick decided that the threat which Alberici posed to public safety necessitated finding him as soon as possible.”

“So Justice divided the team.” Adsila’s tone was deceptively mild. “Would you have made the same decision?”

No. In fact, Grayson had argued with Nick over the call. Ronaldo Alberici was a Level Eleven whose abilities defied normal categorization—it was why half the members of UCRT had been sent in to deal with a single man. “*Send us out in groups of two*,” Grayson had told Nick, “*or someone may not come back*.” Nick had ultimately decided to value expediency over caution, and now Mercedes was recovering at Chicago South-Central Hospital.

Adsila nodded as if she’d won their argument.

“Nick lacks caution,” she said, finally using the real name of the man she’d known since birth.

“He wants to save as many people as possible,” Gray countered.

“Which makes him reckless.”

“There’s no such thing as a risk-free choice, and Nick’s judgment has consistently paid off in the past.” Gray began ticking past missions off on his fingers. “In Rome, Surat, Portland . . .”

“But not in Detroit.”

No, not in Detroit.

Gray wasn't a dunce. He knew what it was that Adsila was suggesting, however obliquely.

"You should consider it," Adsila said, correctly interpreting his expression as rejection of her unspoken offer. "The Ideals are a global peacekeeping force. It wouldn't be the worst thing if UCRT were led by a non-American member." She smirked, more than a little bitterly. "It helps that you're an attractive white man, of course. Unity can't afford to alienate the U.S. Senate completely."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Gray knew that Adsila would recognize his refusal to even consider the idea as a diplomatically worded rejection, which it was.

If Gray were to be completely honest with himself (which he usually was, barring matters of the heart), he didn't consider himself qualified to command The Ideals. Nick might occasionally make calls with which Gray disagreed, but Nick was also able to make snap judgements in the heat of the moment. Gray preferred to take his time carefully deliberate all the options, a trait which didn't lend itself to rapidly barking out orders in the middle of combat. If Nick Wiseman's brain was a racecar that occasionally crashed, then Gray's was a snowplow. Slow, steady, essential but not in the spotlight. He could clear the way and make things easier for Nick, but ultimately everyone's eyes would always be on the racecar. Grayson preferred it that way.

To Gray's surprise, Adsila gave him a genuine smile. "You're a good friend, Grayson Black," she told him. "You'd make an even better leader, but I accept your rejection."

"Better or more pliable?" Gray rebutted.

Adsila laughed. "Is there a difference?"

"You're taking my rejection unexpectedly well," Gray noted.

"Oh, I'm furious," Adsila replied, still smiling brightly. "Appointing you as UCRT's leader would make my life a lot easier. Nick is good PR, but he's too independent. Too rash." She gave Gray a warning look. "Don't you dare say that he's young and untested. You two are the same age."

"Yes, but Nick is American," Gray replied with a slight smile of his own. "Everyone knows that you lot mature slower."

Adsila snorted. "If only people were pear trees. Very well, Black, your opposition has been noted for now. I can't promise that Justice will remain in command: if he makes another bad call, the decision will be out of my hands."

"She asked you to replace me, didn't she?" Nick asked later that night over drinks. "*Please* tell me that you said yes."

"Hells no," Grayson retorted. "I not so good of a friend as to take that burden off your shoulders."

Nick heaved a deep sigh. "A man can hope. What did you tell Adsila?"

"That she should hire you a nanny if she was so worried."

Nick snorted out a laugh. "A nanny? That'll be the day."

[Mind Blind Short Story: The Ring](#)

[Jun 30, 2024](#)

Despite outward appearances and his own secretly low opinion of himself, Nick was not childish. He could act immature, impulsive, and obnoxiously laddish, but (from what Grayson had gleaned about his history over the years) Nick might be the only responsible adult amongst the three elder Wisemans. Calling Nick a "child" was unfair when, given his dual abilities, he never had much of a childhood to begin with. What small piece of carefree adolescence had lingered after constant speeches on "the burden of power," Nick had willingly relinquished in order to become his younger sibling's guardian.

This was Grayson Black's opinion, and Gray respected Nicholas Wiseman more than almost anyone he knew (Gray's mother took first place, obviously).

On some occasions, however, he also wanted to murder Nick.

Now was one such occasion.

"I was riiiiiiight," Nick continued gloating (as he'd be doing so for the past twenty minutes, since their lunchbreak first began). "You loooooooooooooove them. You want to smoooooooooch them. You're gonna get maaaaaaaaaaaarried."

Gray flushed as Nick's words inadvertently found their mark, the box he'd picked up from the jeweler burning a hole through his jacket pocket.

"You're gonna have baaaaabies." Nick's eyes widened as he registered Grayson's sudden flush. "Hold up, are you two planning to adopt already? Is Button pregnant? Are you pregnant? I know that you've always talked about wanting kids, but I figured you'd at least wait until—"

"No one is pregnant!" The burn of Gray's cheeks had spread to the back of his neck and ears. He must look like a boiled lobster.

Nick leaned across the cafeteria table, squinting at Gray suspiciously. "You're hiding something from me," he accused. "You never hide things from me."

"I have secrets," Gray replied, a little offended, at which Nick threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Please," he scoffed. "I know your secrets before you do. Or have you forgotten all the protesting of—" Nick pinched his nose and assumed a nasally British accent—"Why no, Nickleby, old chum, I'm not madly in love with your sibling. Not at all! Tally ho! Cricket! Fish'n'chips!"

"That sounds nothing like me," Gray said, "nor do I care for cricket."

"Rugby, then," Nick corrected with a careless wave of his hand. "Isn't that what you played at that pretentious boarding school with all the other little lordlings? My point is that I knew you were in love before you did, which means that I'm smarter, wiser, and more handsome."

Gray envisioned hitting his best friend over the head with Nick's own bo staff, shoving Nick's body into the boot of a car, and then driving said car into the Lake. Still, as obnoxious as Nick was being, Gray needed to ask his friend for a favor.

Even if doing so was bound to make Nick insufferably smug. More so than he usually was, which was an already significant amount.

"I need you to bake a batch of cookies." Gray said the words in a rush before he could reevaluate his decision to further inflate Nick's ego. "Your sibling's favorite."

Nick, to his credit, almost managed not to bounce in his seat. "And why do you need me to bake cookies?" he asked coyly. "I gave you the recipe four years ago."

"Yes, but mine always come out . . ." Gray winced, envisioning the charcoal chunks that had been yesterday's attempt and trying to think of an adjective that didn't feel too humiliating.

"Revolting," Nick suggested. "Repellant, repulsive, repugnant. Toxic, noxious, burnt, and downright *bad*."

"Inadequate," Gray supplied. "Besides, the cookies will be more poignant if they're made by you."

"Poignant?" Nick repeated. "I've heard my baking called delicious before. Scrumptious, even. But since when are cookies poignant?"

Gray ducked his head. "They're how we met," he muttered.

"You and I met at a UCRT briefing with stale finger sandwiches and bland mini quiches." Nick's smile was so wide and toothy that he looked almost sharkish. "I take it that you're referring to Button?"

Gray nodded. He'd already resigned himself to a lifetime of teasing, but that didn't make handling Nick any easier. Still, he could feel his own lips curve in a smile that matched Nick's own. How could he not smile, when he was so ludicrously happy?

"Button graduates Aeon next month," Nick said. "I'm guessing that the cookies aren't just to celebrate their promotion to MIV."

Gray took the box out of his pocket. With a furtive glance around the empty cafeteria to ensure no one else had entered, he cracked it open to reveal a glimpse of the ring within.

Nick let out a low, impressed whistle. "I'm flattered, Gray, but you're dating my sibling."

Gray laughed and put the box back in his pocket. "Arsehole."

Nick stood and walked over to Gray's side of the table. He pulled the other man upright and drew him into a tight hug.

"Of course I'll bake the cookies!" Nick exclaimed, his hold tightening to the point where Gray struggled to breathe. He tapped Nick's shoulder for release, taking an audible inhale of relief once Nick let go.

"How many do you want? Will twenty-four be enough? Maybe a single giant cookie? No, you know what? Let's make it an even sixty. I can arrange them like a cake."

"Half a dozen or so should be plenty," Gray said. "There's limited room in the picnic basket."

"My dear, dumb future brother-in-law." Nick's gaze was tolerantly pitying. "We're talking about Button's *favorite cookies*. Do you remember what happened last time there wasn't enough for both of you? Are you trying to sabotage your own engagement before it's even official?"

"Sixty it is," Gray agreed.

[Mind Blind Short Story: Fifteen Minutes to Friendship](#)

[Jun 30, 2024](#)

Class ended ten minutes ago. He's still talking.

Antigone and Cassandra are waiting for me. I broke the speed limit to get home during lunch break, but the twenty-minute walk that gave me with them wasn't long enough. After almost a year of the shelter, the girls deserve—they *need*—to be introduced to new places. Maybe even new people, if Cassandra isn't in one of her moods.

I glance at the clock: twelve minutes since class ended. He's still talking.

I heft my bookbag higher onto my shoulder and take several steps towards the door, but he follows me without pausing for breath. How can one person have so many words? Given the way that his eyes never focus on my face and instead flick around the room like a caged street cat, he seems to have even more thoughts than he has words. I wonder if he finds his own mind to be exhausting.

He says something that sounds like a question, his voice lilting higher at the end. I nod and take another step towards the door. He laughs.

"My condolences on your condition," he says with a sudden smirk, and I realize that my nod was a misstep. I don't have to wait long to learn what I just inattentively agreed to, as he follows up with: "Thankfully syphilis is treatable nowadays. Poor Nietzsche, though."

This man is my partner, but I don't understand him at all.

Parker—Glitch, he insists on being called, for reasons which I haven't bothered to ask—slings an arm over my shoulders. I force myself not to flinch at the sudden touch. His gesture of comradery is the closest I've received to a hug since my grandmother's death four years ago. Sensing my unease, Glitch immediately withdraws his arm.

"I'm a lot for you, aren't I?" he asks with a note of sympathy.

I nod.

His smirk blossoms into a broad smile. I think that it's genuine. "I like honest people," he states. "You and I are going to be friends."

"Do I have a choice?" The acerbic comeback pops out of my mouth before I can stop it, shocking me even more than Glitch. When was the last time that I spoke impulsively? My words reflect upon my father, as he constantly reminds me, and I've grown accustomed to evaluating every sentence like a jeweler who inspects common pebbles for flaws.

I glance once more at the clock: fourteen minutes since class ended. I should be home by now; Antigone and Cassandra must be worrying. Did I leave them enough water?

"Am I annoying you that much?" Glitch asks, and for the first time his joking tone isn't fully intact. "You keep checking the clock like Cinderella trying to escape the ballroom."

"My dogs need me," I say.

Glitch's expressions brightens, wiping away all traces of vulnerability as if it had never existed. "You have dogs?" His voice is excited, and all of a sudden I don't find him so annoying.

According to the clock, fifteen minutes have passed since Instructor Kim released class. My next question to Glitch is mostly out of expediency, but also because I approve of the hopeful glint in his eyes.

"Want to meet them?"

"More than lunch with Herman Melville!" Glitch exclaims, then clarifies, "Which is to say, yes! I'd love to." He grabs his own book bag, which bulges in odd lumps and looks three times the weight of my own,

and begins striding towards the door.

“Pick up the pace, Nox!” he calls over his shoulder. “The dogs are waiting.”

Mind Blind Saucy Side: The Other Ring

Jun 30, 2024

(Read The Ring first for context, because these stories happen on the same day.)

The Ring: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/mind-blind-short-107207657>

“I got you a ring,” the love of Gray’s life says with a wicked smile.

Gray’s eyes immediately dart towards his jacket hanging up next to the front door of their shared apartment, where in the breast pocket, a small black box holds his own recent purchase. He forces his gaze away and cocks his head to the side.

“Oh?” he asks, heart in his throat.

“Yup!” his partner replies cheerily. “It vibrates.”

You aren’t sure whether Gray will agree to wear it. Toys aren’t something which you’ve used much before in the bedroom, mostly because the two of you can never remember to actually bring them out. There’s been a random purchase here or there over the years, but even the feather tickler (a mutually agreed favorite) only got used twice before being forgotten in the back of the closet.

Sex with Gray is vanilla. Which you don’t object to, because it is *fantastic*, premium Madagascar-level vanilla with a complex flavor profile that always tastes like Gray.

But you’ve been together four years now. Some diversity might be fun.

Enter the ring.

The black silicone ring itself doesn’t vibrate (you thought that might be a little intense for Gray), but the attachments definitely do, and are, according to the store clerk, intended to “tingle parts of both of you in the best way possible.” You weren’t certain which attachments to get, so bought all the ones that were on sale (including one with two tiny plastic butterflies that you at first thought were hair clips). The

purchase had seemed like a fantastic idea at the time, but Gray's expression right now is . . . difficult for you to interpret. Which is rare, since you know Gray almost better than you know yourself at this point.

He seems relieved yet almost disappointed, an unexpected reaction from someone whose partner just bought them a present. Sometimes, you really wish that you could read his mind as easily as he can yours.

"It has five settings," you say in case your boyfriend is feeling intimidated. "The clerk recommended starting on the lowest and working our way up."

Gray lets out a huff of air from his nose that sounds like either a laugh or a sigh.

"And, just to be clear, this isn't because I think you need something to last longer or anything," you add quickly. "You always last fine. More than fine. Great. More than great, even. I just thought it would be fun to try out something new."

Damnit, you're rambling again. It's been almost half a decade of dating, and you still feel like an awkwardly infatuated teenager whenever you verbally acknowledge the fact that, yes, you and Grayson Black are a couple. Part of you is terrified that you're dreaming, and if someone pinches your cheek then you'll wake up to Nick's voice asking what you want for breakfast before your first day at Aeon.

"Relax, sweetheart," Gray says with a soft chuckle. "I'm not offended."

At your nod of permission, Grayson takes you into his arms. You relax as you allow him to hear *everything* that you want to say but currently can't vocalize without reverting into a stuttering lovestruck fool. His hand rubs your back in slow, steady strokes, and you limp noodle in his arms like a contented cat.

"So, tell me about this ring," he says.

You think back to your visit earlier to the adult shore. About your awkward avoidance of the clerk's disinterested gaze, which had you ducking behind a shelf of butt plugs, and your eventual request for a suggestion once you were sure that they weren't a Ment and thus couldn't read your memories of Grayson. You're impressively disciplined when it comes to not thinking about your and Gray's intimate moments in public (partially because you'd be jealous of any Ment that read your mind and see Gray in all his glory), but the colorful shelves of toys had sparked ideas which even your normal recitations couldn't banish from your head.

"Something we can enjoy together," you had requested. "His pleasure is just as important as mine."

The clerk had recommended the ring.

"We call it The Engagement," they had whispered to you sotto voce as if sharing a naughty secret.

"Because, honey, that's what this beauty gets you."

Gray examines the black silicone ring with interest, although you notice that his eyes keep straying towards his jacket hanging at the front door as if contemplating his escape. You wrap your arms around his neck.

“We don’t have to use it if you’re not comfortable,” you say softly.

Instead of replying, Gray takes the ring from you. He pushes down on the circular indent marking the power button, and his eyebrows shoot up.

“What is it that Sally always says about herself?” he asks. “Ah, yes. Tiny but mighty.”

You laugh and smack his arm. “Sally isn’t who you should be thinking of right this moment.”

“Oh, trust me.” Gray reaches for your hand and slides the silicone band onto your ring finger. You giggle as the vibrating bristles tickle your palm. “You consume my every thought,” he says, and you don’t need to read his mind to know that he means it.

I love this man, you think.

Gray’s blue eyes darken, and you know that he’s heard.

“I’d rather you consume *me*,” you half-joke aloud in response to his earlier comment.

Gray gives you a sideways grin. Before you can comment that he’s *clearly* up to something, he’s swept you up in his arms and is carrying you towards the bedroom. The swift move is the kind choreographed in Hallmark romance movies, and would’ve been awkward if not impossible had it been done by anyone else. But Gray’s telekinesis means that there’s no such thing as an unsmooth pickup.

“Mutual consumption can be arranged,” Gray says.

You run your vibrating finger down his chest, making him almost trip at the bedroom threshold. “And the ring?” you whisper.

“My answer is yes.”

[MB Saucy Side: Parenthood \(Featuring Sally\)](#)

[Jul 31, 2024](#)

"It's too small," Sally complains, pulling down the hemline of your birthday present. Not the one which she'd given you in front of friends and family—that had been a sketchbook filled with her art of the two of you together. The silk negligee came later, after the party ended and the two of you retreated to bed.

"I believe 'too small' is the point," you murmur, appreciatively taking in view. In the flickering candlelight, Sally puts you in mind of a gilded statuette. Her copper curls tumble over bared shoulders, her skin a deep bronzed sheen which Sally has been building up over the last several weeks courtesy of Jergens Natural Glow moisturizer. The negligee itself is a shimmery, reddish gold that drapes over her curves like molten metal.

The fact that Sally lit candles is itself testimony to her effort to make tonight romantic. Fire of any sort means barring Schrödinger from his usual cushion at the foot of your and Sally's bed—you can faintly hear his yowls of protest from the downstairs living room if you focus.

But forget the disgruntled cat. Tonight is about you and Sally.

Fidgeting under your stare, Sally again tugs the lower hem of the negligee so that it covers another few centimeters of her upper thigh. This has the consequence of simultaneously pulling down the upper hem, baring the upper globe of her breasts.

"The underwire on this thing is uncomfortable as hell," Sally comments as she notices the direction of your gaze. She straightens her shoulders, the movement thrusting out her bosom even further, and a sly smile curves her lips. "I'm guessing it has the intended effect, given your expression."

"It's doing the job, alright," you say, taking a step closer that causes Sally's breath to hitch and her breasts to rise. "In return, I should—"

"MEOWWWNOWWYOOWWNN!"

Your suggestion is interrupted as Schrödinger plaintive growling, which you had thus far been ignoring, suddenly escalates to a banshee's howl. You roll your eyes, knowing Sally's cat too well to be concerned by his theatrics. Sally's brow, on the other hand, furrows with worry.

"He's not used to being locked out of the bedroom," she says. "Maybe I should bring his pillow to him? He might have trouble sleeping without it."

You bite back a chuckle. "He has three beds downstairs, and another in the guest bedroom. He'll be fine."

"But—"

You cut off her protest with a kiss. Sally wraps her arms around your shoulders, her body going limp against your own. Her tongue touches the corner of your mouth before darting away mischievously; yours pursues. The kiss deepens, teasing at first and then more intense.

It occurs to you that Schrödinger is being suspiciously quiet right now, but you force the thought from your mind. Your palm flattens against the curve of her hip, pulling her so close that you can no longer tell where your flesh ends and hers begins. Whereas the first half of the kiss was playtime, this marks a declaration of intent. Eventually, Sally forgets to breathe and break away panting.

"I take it you like the negligee," Sally whispers.

"I like you." You press your thumb against her ravished lower lip, and moan when she licks your finger. "The negligee is a bonus."

Crash!

The sound of shattering glass from downstairs is followed by Sally's startled shriek. As Schrödinger resumes his angsty yodel, she realizes what happened and buries her face into your chest with a frustrated groan.

"What are the odds that Schrody broke that hideous vase that my dads gave us?" she asks dolefully. "And not the Venetian plate that we brought back from our honeymoon?"

You kiss her forehead. "Worst case scenario, I'll have to take you back to Italy."

"I hold you to that promise," Sally says, reluctantly disentwining herself from your arms. "Let's go clean up the glass, and then we can continue."

[MB Short Story: Drafts](#)

[Jul 31, 2024](#)

Dear Button,

Hi, sweetheart! It's Mom. Your father said that he'd give you this letter since you haven't

Dearest Button,

Your father must've already told you that this letter was from me, and I'm so happy that you decided to read it. How are you? It's been a few weeks since we last talked. I don't blame you for not answering my calls. You need time to process what happened, and I want to respect your wishes. I miss

Dear Button,

How are you holding up? Your brother says that you barely come out of your room. He's concerned for you, as is your father. I'm worried about you too, even though I probably don't have the right after what I did.

I hurt you, even if it wasn't on

Dear Button,

Your father told a joke today, and I laughed for the first time since being admitted to this damn place. You know that I'm horrible at remembering jokes, but it was utterly terrible (like most of his jokes). Something about the Pope doing a crossword puzzle. I wasn't even laughing at the joke so much as the nurse's appalled expression over the fact that Justice of the Ideals was sitting in the psych ward visiting area telling crude jokes to his wife. That nurse was initially tasked with my CO, but I'm pretty sure that she didn't peg my identity until she saw your dad today. The power of makeup is formidable indeed, as I can barely even recognize myself in the mirror without my usual war paint.

I'm getting used to the silence. I miss you, but I'm beginning to realize how much I missed myself as well. My own thoughts, uninterrupted. I feel guilty for the sense of relief that arises from hearing myself, and just myself, for the first time in years. It wasn't as bad when you were a child—your thoughts were new and bright, easy to distinguish from my own. I could handle it. But as you grew older and more mature, the line blurred, and your words began sounding more and more like my own. I lost myself beneath the tumult.

It's not your fault. Teenage years are meant to be an emotional roller coaster (hell, I've shown you photos of my goth phase). I should've been stronger, able to separate what I was feeling from what you were feeling. Instead, I kept running away on missions.

I don't deserve to laugh.

I won't send this one. Obviously.

Dear Button,

Your mother is a coward. People would be disappointed to find out that one of Unity's founders is so weak, but I no longer give a fuck.

All I care about is your wellbeing. Your brother says that you've been refusing to leave your room, and I am a total hypocrite if I act as if I'm not doing the same damn thing.

I won't send this one either.

Dear Button

Because of me, you almost died. I won't ask you to forgive me, because what I did was unforgivable. You need to know that I NEVER intended to

Dear Button,

I wish that I could take it back. I wish that I could take so much back, and that I had made so many different decisions over these past few years. I should have been honest with our family. I should have asked for help instead of pulling away from you. I know that my distance hurt you, even before what happened in the kitchen.

Before what I did to you.

It's never easy for a parent to admit that they've failed their child, but I failed you. I hurt you. If I could change the past, I'd have done things differently and you never would've had to endure all the pain that I caused. I'd do anything to keep you safe, even if it means

Dear Button,

I can't change the past. I can't fix the many mistakes that I made over the years, and I can't undo all the harm that I've caused. I wish that I could rewind time, but wishing won't earn back your trust. I'd like to explain what happened if you'll let me, but I also know that no explanation makes what I did to you forgivable. It doesn't matter that it was by accident, I hurt my baby.

I hurt you, when my biggest priority in life has always been to keep you safe. I don't expect you to forgive me, because I'll never forgive myself.

Take as long as you need t

Dear El,

I love you.

Always,

Mom

[MB Backstory: Rejection/Projection](#)

[Aug 30, 2024](#)

At 5:18pm on a Tuesday, Caleb Fowler's heart finally broke.

Prior to that Tuesday, Caleb's heart had been fragile, cracked and scarred, but he had glued it back together time and time again by force of will and deliberate denial. After that Tuesday, all that remained was dust.

That Tuesday also happened to be Caleb's seventeenth birthday. This distinguishment was secondary to the fact that it was a Tuesday, however, as Tuesdays were the day when Caleb's older brother, Hunter, visited home from NYU, his tuition to which was paid for using Caleb's former college fund.

Unfortunately for Caleb, his parents had an almost zealot belief in their eldest son's abilities and had been confident that he would be accepted into Aeon as a Level 8 Telepath. Thus, they failed to set up a college fund for Hunter. When Hunter failed to gain admittance to the renowned program, they'd repurposed Caleb's (which had been set up for him by his grandfather, a non-Ment who favored his similarly unpowered grandchild) under the justification that "You can always get a scholarship or loan, but poor Hunt has already lost his lifelong dream and doesn't deserve to go into debt as well." And Caleb didn't want to be a bad brother, did he? Caleb had been fourteen at the time that this was explained to him by his parents, and he'd been thoroughly convinced by their logic.

Mrs. Fowler was an Empath, which meant she was very persuasive when it came to making up Caleb's mind for him. She did so every day of the week, but most especially on Tuesdays. Because Tuesdays were for Hunter, which meant that Caleb would be (according to his mother) happier staying at home while the other three members of his family went to seminars on how best to utilize their psychic agility. Such a pricy ticket would be wasted on a Lo-Po, and Caleb obediently agreed with his mother's suggestion that he'd be much happier staying home and playing video games in his bedroom.

It wasn't neglect, Caleb told himself as the cracks in his heart spread. Caleb's father, mother, and brother were all Ments. Caleb wasn't. It made sense for Caleb not to go with them. Besides, Caleb got to be with his parents the rest of the week now that Hunter had left for college. Even if they never took him to Comic Con, or any of the local tech expos, or even showed up for his robotics tournaments. Caleb would've been overjoyed to have his parents take him to a baseball game, and Caleb had hated baseball ever since Jimmy Kragen took a foam bat to his shins during t-ball practice at age six.

This Tuesday was going to be different. Since it was Caleb's birthday, his parents had promised to go with him on a tour of one of the several colleges to which Caleb had earned a full ride (a necessity given that Hunter had taken his college fund). Caleb skipped robotics club in order to get home early. He had to prepare for tonight: unless Caleb's hopes were getting the better of him (again), his parents and Hunter would be taking him out to his favorite burger joint after the campus tour.

The house was quiet; Mom and Dad must still be at work. The shirt which Caleb planned on wearing that night, a baby blue polo that his mother had once said brought out his eyes, lay draped neatly across his bed. The shirt was faded and thin from frequent wear, but he'd still ironed it twice over the weekend, once on Saturday and then again on Sunday. As much as he cherished the memory of his mother's compliment, this might be the shirt's last outing. Caleb debated getting out the ironing board a third time but decided that would be overkill.

He shot off a text in family chat, reminding everyone that the tour started at 4pm and that it took twenty minutes to drive to the campus. A quick frown when he noticed that no one had ever replied to his last text two months ago, immediately banished as Caleb reassured himself that his parents had *promised* tonight would be different.

Tonight was his.

By 3pm, Caleb was showered, shaved, and had gelled his hair in a style similar to his older cousin. The style wasn't quite suited for Caleb's round face, but Caleb rather thought that the combed-back bangs showcased his eyes. Maybe his mother would notice.

No one had responded to his text by 3:15pm, and Caleb was beginning to get worried. He contemplated texting again but decided against being needy. To distract himself, Caleb plucked his unibrow. . . for over ten minutes, resulting in eyebrows that were significantly shorter than eyebrows were supposed to be.

At 3:30pm, Caleb resent his text. Just in case it hadn't gone through the first time.

At 3:45pm, overcoming his fear of being obnoxious, he called his mother's phone. She didn't pick up. His father's phone went likewise unanswered at 3:48pm, as well as Hunter's at 3:50pm.

At 3:55pm, he mustered the courage to leave a message on his mother's voicemail.

"It's Caleb," he said, his lips forcing a smile out of habit. "Your other son." He paused as if waiting for laughter, but of course there was none. "I was just calling to know how close you all are. It's okay if we're a little late—the tour doesn't end until six." He paused again, wondering how to end the call.

"Love you," he said before hanging up.

He called again at 4:10. And then again at 4:30.

By 5pm, the blue polo shirt was a wrinkled ball on the floor. Caleb sat at his computer wearing his usual black hoodie, eating from a bag of ranch flavored Ruffles, and trying to convince himself that his family had all been killed in a tragic car accident. His parents and Hunter must've been on there way over when their vehicle was hit. They hadn't forgotten his birthday; they were all just lying dead in a ditch somewhere. The possibility didn't make Caleb feel any better, but it was more forgivable.

At 5:12, Caleb finished the chips and went to the kitchen. He grabbed two otter pops from the fridge (neither one purple, because purple was Hunter's favorite flavor).

At 5:16, he went back to the kitchen for another otter pop.

And at 5:18pm, his phone rang. Caleb hastily wiped his hand on his sweatpants, but his fingers were still sticky with purple popsicle juice as he picked up the phone. It took several swipes to answer the call; his hands were trembling.

"You didn't have to leave so many messages." His mother's voice was brusque and annoyed. "I couldn't talk because I was waiting on a text about our reservation."

"You have a reservation somewhere?"

His family hadn't forgotten after all, then. They'd decided to surprise him with a reservation somewhere nice, and Caleb had ruined the surprise by being impatient. He almost laughed at how needlessly lachrymose he'd been, and wondered if he had time to iron the blue polo again before his family picked him up.

"Yes, dinner with my old college roommate," his mother said.

Her words struck Caleb's heart with the force of a chisel against clay. "But it's my birthday."

"Didn't you get your father's text?"

"What text?" Caleb asked. "There was no text."

There was a pause, followed by some murmuring in the background.

"It's my birthday," Caleb repeated.

"Dad says that he definitely texted you," his mother said, ignoring Caleb's last spoken words. "You must've used up your data plan again. I told you to stop wasting your time with that mobile game."

The hammer struck the chisel again, and this time Caleb could feel the edges crumbling away. If he had used up his data plan, then they wouldn't be having this discussion over the phone.

"Anyway, I'm sorry but we have to reschedule that tour you wanted to go on," his mother said. "Lorelai happened to be in town for a wedding, and this was the only night she was free to meet Hunter."

The final hammer strike, and all that remained of Caleb Fowler's former heart was a pile of sand.

"Her husband is a member of Aeon's Admittance Board," Patricia continued on when Caleb didn't respond. "If this dinner goes well, I'm sure she'll put in a good word on Hunt's behalf. His application could be reconsidered!"

Caleb could almost hear Patricia's eyes roll when he didn't respond.

"Your brother getting into Aeon would benefit you as well," she said in the sickly-sweet voice of one offering a lollipop to a petulant toddler. "After he's relocated to Chicago, the rest of Grandpa's money would be yours again. You could go to a better college than . . ." She paused, blanking on the name of Caleb's dream school that they were supposed to tour *tonight*.

Caleb didn't bother to remind her.

“Anyway,” Patricia said, “our table is ready, so I need to stop being rude and ignoring Lorelai. We’ll reschedule your birthday for this weekend. Okay, honey?”

She hung up before Caleb could vocalize that, empirically speaking, none of this could be categorized as ‘okay.’ Not that she would’ve heard his words.

Dry and itchy eyes returned to staring at the computer screen. The web browser was open to *Podium*, a forum which Caleb’s cousin had recently introduced him, but the words blurred into long black lines as Caleb fought against blinking. Blinking meant crying, and crying meant caring, and caring meant losing.

A new box of black lines appeared on screen. Caleb scrubbed his eyes, bringing the text into focus. He needed to focus on something else, *anything* else, before he completely fell to pieces. He squinted at the headline and snorted.

The new topic was titled *Forgotten Child*.

Caleb wasn’t religious, but he could recognize a sign when it popped up on his widescreen monitor. He clicked into the message board and read the first few comments:

RighteousWrath: *Anyone else disgusted by how the Wisemans hide their one normal kid like a dirty little secret?*

PlsMarryMeMikotoSenpai: *Stereotypical Ment parents if u ask me.*

Thr33sWild: *Hope and Justice never talk about their youngest in interviews. Always mention how proud they are of their sUpERsPeCiAl oldest son tho.*

Flashdance1983: *Poor kid. Parents treat their existence like an embarrassment.*

Skibidididoo: *Do they even exist????? There’s like no info about the youngest Wiseman online.*

Flashdance1983: *Aimee Osborne vibes.*

PlsMarryMeMikotoSenpai: *Baby Wiseman is a cryptid lololol*

Thr33sWild: *Probably just as corrupt as their parents, if we’re being real. Baby Wiseman may not be a Ment, but they were still born drinking the kool-aide outta Momma’s psychic teet.*

Caleb’s fingers were clacking a response before he was even aware that he’d touched the keyboard: “There’s no way that Wiseman buys into their parent’s bullshit rhetoric,” he typed in impassioned defense of a person who, until this very moment, he’d hadn’t known existed. “Add in the fact that their older brother is Nick Wiseman? I guarantee that kid wishes that they’d been born into a different family.”

It felt good to stand up for Wiseman Junior when they weren’t there to speak up for themselves. That being said, it probably wouldn’t hurt to make sure that this supposed child of America’s most famous

superheroes actually did exist, and that the original post wasn't a troll. Caleb minimized Podium and opened up a search engine.

And at 6:32pm, on the same Tuesday that his heart broke, Caleb Fowler began to heal by imagining a friend.

[Mind Blind AU: The Hallmark Edition](#)

[Sep 30, 2024](#)

When customers first walked into *La Petite Paquerette*, it took them several seconds to realize that they were no longer outside. The small shop's interior resembled not so much a store as it did a secret garden, with only the occasional glimpse of walls peeking through the hanging plants and shelves filled with vibrant bouquets. Many customers never noticed these glimpses of red brick, however, given that their eyes often fluttered closed upon entry into the shop, so as better to experience the heady, honey-rich aroma of flowers (the store owner kept a pot of deep purple heliotrope by the front door, to greet those entering with its sweet, almost cherry pie, scent).

The proprietor was a man whose rigid posture and stern disposition was more suited to a military general than an owner of a general store, which *La Petite Paquerette* had once been half a century ago before its previous owner had converted it into a flower shop. No one in town knew the current owner's first name: he was only called "Mr. Kim," or simply "Kim" by those without proper manners. It wasn't just his name that was a mystery. No one knew anything about Mr. Kim beyond the fact that he was a florist and possessed an almost mystical insight into his customers' needs and desires. He asked questions like a detective: what colors their partner wore, their favorite season. For each answer, he'd select a different flower, the end result a bouquet uniquely and perfectly suited to its ultimate recipient. Rather than duration or exclusivity, everyone in town agreed that a relationship could only be considered to be *truly* serious after one partner paid a visit to *La Petite Paquerette*.

You'd long ago given up on receiving a bouquet from *La Petite Paquerette*. At this point in your life, your primary fantasy involved burning *La Petite Paquerette* to the ground. Each time one of your friends received a wrapped bouquet from their partner, you grieved the loss of another Friday Night Trivia Team member, until eventually only one member remained who was regularly available to answer pop culture questions over at Nick's Pizza Parlor. (To clarify: it was you. The only person not busy with date nights or children was you. You and your friends still hung out occasionally, of course, but they no longer had time in their busy schedules for impromptu road trips to Wisconsin in search of farm-fresh cheese curds.)

“That’s what happens when people grow up, Button,” Nick said sympathetically as you collected your weekly free pizza voucher from him at a trivia night where you’d been a team of one. “They get busy.”

Your only salvation was Sally. Although your shared friend group had once banned her from trivia group on grounds that she got too competitive, you unanimously voted (by yourself) to allow her back on the team after everyone else cancelled at the last minute for the third time in a row. Sally made her triumphant return to jeopardy night . . . which ended with her and Nick shouting at each other due to Sally’s insistence that Mauna Kea, *not* Mount Everest, was the tallest mountain on earth since Nick hadn’t specified that height began at sea level.

When Nick apologized, he did so with a bouquet from *La Petite Paquerette*. Ten months and one ceremony later, Sally could no longer join your trivia team on grounds that she helped your brother come up with the questions.

As far as you were concerned, any plant originating from that cursed flower shop was a harbinger of doom. This was confirmed the night that Nick and Sally invited you and your parents over to celebrate their one-year anniversary. In the middle of the dining room table sat a glorious bouquet of sunflowers and blue irises. The arrangement was cheery yet elegant, and you knew the instant that you laid eyes on it that something terrible was about to happen.

“Nick picked it up for me from *La Petite Paquerette*,” Sally said, noticing the way that you were side-eyeing the centerpiece.

After dinner, Nick and Sally announced that they were temporarily relocating to Denver in order to expand the *Nick’s Pizza Parlor* franchise.

“How long is ‘temporarily’?” you asked.

“Two years at most,” Nick replied. “We found a three bedroom for rent, so you’re welcome to visit anytime!”

You forced a smile, congratulated them, and internally wailed as the final nail on your social life’s coffin was driven home. It’s not as if you lived in Chicago, after all. This was a small town with limited options—maybe you should relocate somewhere yourself. Somewhere fun and sunny, like Italy or Thailand.

Finland, you decided later at home after your third glass of wine. Or Iceland. You didn’t know much about either country, but you wanted someplace that you could wear your cute sweater collection.

One hours and two more glasses of wine later, you’d settled on either Switzerland or Japan. Possibly Brazil.

After researching the visa process for relocating to any of those countries (and having another half glass of wine), you decided that it would probably be too difficult to move abroad and that you were instead trapped forever and ever and ever in your too-small, suffocating hometown where everyone was

married and settled and no one ever wanted to have fun anymore. Furthermore, you deduced that your predicament was all *La Petite Paquerette's* fault*.*

"It's those curshed flowers," you slurred, glaring out the window of your living room. To add insult to injury, the floral shop was right across the street, its fairy-light encircled windows and adorable polka dot pots taunting you and your eternal solitude.

Hold up. You pressed your nose against the windowpane, squinting. Beyond floral shop's interior lights were off. The owner must've gone home.

And you had half a carton of eggs in the refrigerator.

Without thinking (thought isn't something that occurs after drinking an entire bottle of wine by yourself), you rushed to the kitchen.

"This one ish for Talia's baby ruining our Vegas trip!"

Your first throw fell short of *La Petite Paquerette's* entrance; the second, you threw too far left and it landed in the hedge. The third egg, however, exploded against the wall with a satisfying *splat*, bits of white eggshell sticking to the red brick. You only had three more eggs—you needed to make them count.

The second hit the window, egg white dripping down the previously spotless glass.

"*That's* for Caleb and Stephanie leaving the trivia team!"

The third egg knocked over an empty pot.

"For Kent's kids constantly cancelling book club!"

One last egg, cold and smooth in the palm of your hand. You wound up your arm, infusing all the accumulated resentment that had gathered over the years due to everyone else changing while your life remained stagnant.

"And this is for Nick and Sally!" you hollered at the cloudy night sky, no longer caring if you woke the neighbors (Or about the possibility of getting arrested. Liquor is magical like that.).

The last egg soared through the dark like a shooting star empowered by your drunken, belligerent rage. It hit the broad chest of *La Petite Paquerette's* owner, who had opened the front door at just the wrong time. Golden yolk stained his white t-shirt like blood blossoming from a wound.

"Wiseman?"

You froze, the empty egg carton in your hand testifying to your guilt even if Kim hadn't just witnessed you chuck an egg at his chest.

“What’re you doing here?” you demanded.

You couldn’t make out Kim’s expression in the darkness, but he did actually deign to answer your question. “Sometimes I sleep on the couch if I end up working late.” He took a step closer to you. “Why are you vandalizing my store, pray tell?”

“I’m not vandalizing anything!” you refuted, offended. “I’m egging it.”

“My mistake,” Kim said sarcastically. “Why are you egging my shop?”

“Because your flowers are ruining my life!”

Kim heaved an exasperated sigh. “Wiseman, are you drunk?”

“Yesh.”

Kim sighed again. “You can clean this up in the morning. For now, let’s get you back home.” He came closer to you, hand outstretched as if to offer assistance.

You scowled at him. You might be a little bit tipsy, but your balance was *fine*, and you were more than capable of—

You woke to an unfamiliar ceiling and a stiff back. You struggled upright, only for your pounding headache to immediately chastise you for the movement.

“You’re finally awake,” said a deep, irritated voice. “Drink.”

A warm mug was thrust into your hands, and you gazed suspiciously at the pale green liquid. Where those bean sprouts floating within? You sniffed the steam. It smelled like seaweed.

“What is it?” you asked.

“Hangover cure,” Kim replied, his hands remaining clasped over yours until he was certain that you wouldn’t spill. He had nice hands, you couldn’t help but notice. Strong, calloused, and almost as warm as the . . . tea? Soup? Whatever was in the mug.

“Drink,” he ordered.

You took a tentative sip and instantly spat the liquid back into the mug. Whatever Kim had given you, it tasted like death by anchovy.

Kim tsked. “*Drink*,” he insisted for a third time. “You’re dehydrated.”

“Maybe just a glass of water?”

At Kim's disapproving frown, you took another sip of the concoction. The second swallow tasted better and went down easier. There was a subtle spiciness to the brew that helped clear your head. You took the opportunity to examine your surroundings; given the quaint brickwork and decorative plants all around, you seemed to be on the top floor of *La Petite Paquerette*. Your bed was actually a worn leather couch, your legs still covered by a knitted throw blanket which you assumed that Kim had laid atop you.

"About last night . . ." you began.

"It's six am," Kim interrupted. "Store opens at seven."

Was that his unsubtle way of telling you to get lost already? You attempted to stand, only for the floor to wobble beneath your feet and cause you to sit abruptly back down on the sofa.

"You have an hour to clean the exterior." Kim pointed to the corner, where a bucket and stack of towels lay waiting.

You winced. Your recollection of last night might be vague and fuzzy, but you remembered eggs being involved. "That . . . sounds fair."

"You also owe me an explanation," Kim stated in such an imperiously condescending way that you took another swallow of soup to keep from retorting. The last thing that you wanted to do was goad him into calling the cops (in a small town like this one, everyone knew of your misdeed by lunchbreak—especially when your father was the town's police chief and your mother the public prosecutor).

"An explanation?" you echoed weakly.

"As to why you vandalized my storefront."

"It's complicated," you grumbled.

Kim crossed his arms, no words required to communicate that you were trying his patience. Clearly, you weren't getting out of this.

You sighed. Not because you were embarrassed by your (extremely juvenile) logic (this was a Hallmark satire story after all, where protagonists know no shame), but because you doubted that Kim would understand the rationale.

"Every time that your flowers appear in my life, I lose someone," you say. "Last night, I found out that I'm losing both my best friend and my brother. The news got to me."

"Your brother bought a bouquet yesterday," Kim recalled. "He said it was to celebrate a business opportunity." The crinkle of confusion between his dark brows smoothed. "Ah. I take it they're moving?"

You nodded.

"Let me ensure that I'm comprehending correctly," Kim said slowly. "You're upset that your brother and sister-in-law are moving, and you have thus decided to blame their move on . . . my flower shop." His flat look made it quite clear what Kim thought about your conclusion.

You scowled at him. "It's a little more complicated than that."

"Is it?" Kim challenged.

Well, no, it wasn't. Your train of thought was pretty simplistic (overly, many might say). But you weren't about to admit faulty logic to the man responsible for your misery.

"Talía, Stephanie, Caleb, and Kent," you said. "Three weddings, five children. Everyone is always busy now because of your damn flowers. And now you've taken away Nick and Sally, too."

Kim blinked, his surly composure slipping for the first time and being replaced by sheer confusion. "I shouldn't even have to state this, but people buy flowers to celebrate things *after* they've already been decided," he said. "No matter how frustrated you may be by your friends' changes in lifestyle, blaming my shop is ridiculous."

"*You're* ridiculous."

"Maybe so," Kim replied evenly. "But you still need to wash the egg off my front door."

While you were cleaning *La Petite Paquerette's* front, several neighbors passed by on their morning walks. You answered their queries with vague responses like "Weather is great today, so I wanted to spend some time outside!" and "Oh, you know, just helping a neighbor tidy up!" without disclosing what had actually happened. Still, Clarence had seen you. Rumors would all over town by noon.

You groaned, dreading your parents' inevitable interrogation, just as the front door swung open.

After examining the cleaned wall, Kim nodded. "Acceptable," he declared, as if you hadn't just spent the last half hour rubbing your hands raw in effort to get dried egg out of the brick.

Kim retreated back into the store only to reappear a short moment later with a terracotta pot held in his hands.

Inside the pot was a cactus.

It was a cute cactus, to be fair, with prickles that looked like soft fuzz (although you weren't about to touch it to verify the texture).

He handed you the cactus.

"Why are you handing me a cactus?" you asked, warily accepting the pot. Maybe he wanted you to decorate the exterior as well?

"It's a gift."

"And why are you giving me a gift?"

Kim's lips curved a slight smirk, but for once the expression felt more genuinely amused than mocking. "Maybe you'll be less inclined to blame my flowers for your misfortune if you have one of your own."

"This isn't a flower," you countered. "It's a cactus."

"It'll bloom eventually."

"Uh-huh." Now that the hangover was fading, you had enough acumen to be suspicious of his motives. "What's the real reason? Does gifting a cactus mean 'stay away from me' or something?"

"No," Kim replied with an exhale that was almost a laugh. "I simply thought it suited you."

At your dubious eyebrow raise, he elaborated: "In western culture, the cactus represents strength and resilience. Traits that might be helpful in your life, given the level of frustration which you unleashed upon my shop's outer wall."

"That's it?"

He shrugged. "Feng shui claims that putting a cactus in the window offers protection. Japanese hanakotoba has an alternative meaning." He shrugged again, seemingly casual, but his eyes remained glued to your face, observing your reaction. "Pick whatever symbology you'd like. It's the plant that most reminded me of you."

You weren't certain whether to be appreciative or offended. On the one hand, Kim had given you a gift. On the other hand, he'd also compared you to the one plant known to wound anyone who dared to touch it. What was he implying about your personality? Kim didn't give you time to decide on your feelings, however, as his next announcement made you reconsider everything that you thought you knew about the shop owner.

"I'll pick you up tonight at seven," he said. "I realize that trivia night doesn't start until eight, but arriving early will guarantee we get the seats closest to the microphone." He rolled his eyes. "Your brother mumbles. It's a miracle that anyone ever hears the questions correctly."

"What?"

"I'd prefer there be no more midnight assaults on my property," Kim explained. "You're unhappy due to your lack of a social life. This solves both problems."

His words were too true for you to argue, unfortunately, so you blurted out the first question that came to mind: "Is this a date?"

Kim raised a single brow. "Is that how you've decided to interpret it?" he asked, but you noticed that he didn't refute the conclusion.

"I—" You resisted the urge to pinch yourself to verify that this was really happening.

"Put the cactus in direct sunlight, and water once a week," Kim instructed. "Make sure that the soil is completely dry between waterings, otherwise the roots will rot."

"You—"

"Eighteen hundred tonight," Kim said. "Be ready."

[MB Saucy Side: One Succulent Evening](#)

[Oct 1, 2024](#)

A saucy follow-up to <https://www.patreon.com/posts/mind-blind-au-113104642>

(Apologies but Flower Shop Rosy has been my recent obsession)

"I caught on early, you know." You waggle a finger in Ambrose's face, letting out a laugh as he playfully nips its tip.

"Caught onto what?" he asks, leaning back in the bed and drawing you comfortably into his arms. You nestle up against his broad chest with a small sigh of contentment.

"The cactus."

"What cactus?" Ambrose voice is distracted, his hands meandering slowly downwards your body. He presses a kiss against your collar. "Why are we talking about my work right now?"

"The cactus you gave me before we started dating," you elaborate. "I looked up what it meant in Hanakotoba."

Ambrose's hands freeze at your waist. "Oh?" he asks, tone deceptively light. "I'm afraid that I don't remember."

"Cacti represent attraction." You lower your voice to a husky whisper. "Lust." You rake your nails down his chest, taking a primal satisfaction in the way that the touch makes him shiver before he catches your wrist.

“Did you know before our date that night?” Ambrose demands.

“Oh, I looked it up the moment that I got back home.”

It is a rare and miraculous occasion when Ambrose Kim, stoic ice king within whom's mouth butter would freeze, blushes. It's so faint that you only see it because you know to look for it, a barely visible tinge of red against his tan cheekbones.

“That's why you acted so awkwardly, then,” Ambrose says gruffly in order to hide his embarrassment.

“Excuse me? I acted perfectly normally. You were the one who was weirdly quiet the entire time except when it came to yelling out the trivia answers.”

Ambrose doesn't answer immediately, his gardener-calloused fingers gently toying with the lobe of your ear. He kisses your temple and lets out a defeated sigh.

“I was nervous,” he confesses, so quietly that you can barely hear him despite being pressed together. He lets out an equally soft laugh. “You have no idea how long I'd been wanting to ask you out.”

“Presumably before I pelted your front door with raw eggs,” you say, earning a louder chuckle from your partner.

“Much longer,” he confirms.

“Since when, exactly?”

“I don't recall.”

“Liar.” You pinch his upper arm, and he rustles your hair with his large hand.

“Since I was in charge of flowers for the wedding,” he says.

“Which wedding?” you press. A big reason for your resentment towards Ambrose had been, after all, the fact that his flowers were the ones all your friends used to decorate their venues.

Ambrose claims your lips with his own in lieu of answering your question. His mouth is hot, his tongue wicked, and the way his fingers curve around the back of your neck—firm yet gentle—almost manages to distract you.

Almost, but not quite. You've been building up mental immunity to Ambrose Kim's distraction tactics over the past year of dating.

“Which wedding?” you ask again, shifting so that you're straddling above him in bed. You arch against him, pressing your bodies together in exactly the way he likes, and he lets out a low, tortured moan.

“You're cruel,” he complains.

"Which wedding did you fall for me?" you whisper. "Be a good boy and tell me."

Ambrose glares at you as if offended, but you don't miss the way that his pupils dilate at the phrase "good boy." You make a note to tuck the words away in your arsenal for later. You roll your hips, and Ambrose's head flops back onto the pillow with a muttered curse in Korean.

"The first one," he growls.

You straighten off him, shocked. "Caleb and Stephanie's wedding? But that was . . ."

"Three years before our first date," Ambrose finishes. He grabs your hips, adjusting them flush against his own, and grinds upward until your moan matches his prior one.

"As I said," Ambrose says with an insufferably smug smirk, "I'd been interested in you for a long time."

You push him away again, trying to clear your thoughts of the fog of lust in order to review this new information.

"Why did you never say anything?" you demand. You lived right across the street from his shop, for crying out loud! So much time wasted being apart when the two of you could've been together, simply because he hadn't spoken up sooner. It was almost enough to make you angry, were the thought of Ambrose secretly pining over you from the window of his shop not so uncharacteristically adorable.

"I thought you were allergic to flowers," he says, "and concluded that you wouldn't be interested."

"Why would you think that I was allergic to flowers?"

"You always glared at the floral arrangements during ceremonies," Ambrose points out. "The reasonable explanation was allergies." He nuzzles into your neck with a low chuckle. "Back then, I didn't realize that you were a fundamentally unreasonable person."

You bat his hands away, which had been inching towards your backside. "Is that why you gave me a cactus? Because you thought I was allergic to flowers?"

"The symbolism was part of it," he says. "But, yes. I assumed that the traditional offering of a bouquet would've ended up in your trash can."

You lean down so that your foreheads press together. "I never hated your flowers," you whisper, ignoring the way Ambrose's eyes widen with disbelief. "I just wanted some of my own."

All of a sudden, Ambrose is on top of you. "I'll give you the whole damn store, then," he says, staring down at you hungrily. "Let's discuss my payment."

[Oct 30, 2024](#)

“Cara mia!” John exclaimed in the worst Spanish accent that Hope had ever heard. “How I adore you!”

Hope yelped in protest as John grabbed her hand . . . which was holding a tube of liquid eyeliner. Her perfect cat-eye miraculously remained intact, but it was a close call. Setting down the tube on the bathroom counter, she glared at her husband. John, accustomed to such glares, remained unphased.

He ran loud kisses from the back of her hand to her elbow, and Hope couldn’t help but break into a giggle at the tickle of his fake moustache. Said moustache was crooked when John stopped, but he had a proud smile beneath the lopsided black bristles.

“It’s our first Halloween as a married couple,” John said. “How does it feel?”

Hope reached up and adjusted his moustache. “Almost perfect.”

“Almost?”

“I’m still disappointed that my paper mâché hand fell apart,” Hope said, grinning at his worried frown. “But it’s perfect except for that one Thing.”

John didn’t get the joke (he’d never watched the Addams family), but Hope loved him anyway.

“Honey, are you certain about this?”

Hope paused from where she was wielding a pair of scissors. “It’s just a dress, John.”

“It’s your wedding dress! Filled with memories! And you’re cutting it up in order to make a . . .”

“Corpse bride costume,” Hope reminded him. “From that old movie we watched last month.”

“It just seems a waste.”

Hope sighed and set the shears down on the kitchen table. “John, you’re it for me.”

John, bless his himbo heart, blinked in confusion at her proclamation. “What?”

“I said that you’re it for me,” Hope repeated. “I wanted to elope, but we had the big traditional wedding because that’s what you wanted. You’re the only person who I’d ever agree to marry, let alone have a ceremony with, and we’ve been there, done that. I might as well get a second happy memory out of the dress given how much it cost.”

John ducked his head, still prone to bashfulness whenever she spoke sincerely despite them having been married for two whole years. "You're it for me, too," he said softly.

"I know," Hope replied. "So go grab the red paint from the craft closet while I cut this up."

"We should've gone as Morticia and Gomez," John whined.

"We did that Addams two years ago," Hope replied without looking away from the bathroom mirror, where she was carefully dabbing blush onto the apples of her cheeks.

"You were hot as Morticia." John frowned, looking down at the frothy blue fabric of his costume. "I looked hot as Gomez," he added glumly.

Hope hummed noncommittally, swiping her lower lip with gloss.

"Couldn't we have at least gone as Sally and Jack?" John continued to complain. "You love that movie."

"Like I told you, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a Christmas movie. 'Christmas' is literally in the title."

"No one else thinks that."

"Well, I do. It would feel odd dressing up as Sally for Halloween."

"Yet *this* is acceptable?"

Hope leveled her husband a stern look. "Don't forget your marriage vows. I get to choose the Halloween costumes every year."

"I thought you were kidding when you insisted on that clause."

"I wasn't."

John groaned.

"I don't know what you're so upset about," Hope said, refocusing on her reflection and applying another layer of mascara. "I asked what your favorite horror movie was. You're the one who chose *The Shining*."

"I thought that I'd get to dress up as Jack Nicholson's character," John grumbled. "I didn't think you'd pick the creepy twins." He sighed. "Adsila is never going to let me live this down."

Hope smiled at him. "Don't fret so much, dear," she said. "You make an adorable Grady sister. Now come here so I can put your wig on."

"Who's the cutest Pugsley ever?" John cooed at his newborn son.

“Bah!” Nick burped back.

John rushed over to his wife, who was applying her eyeliner in the bedroom’s well-lit vanity. “Did you hear that?” he exclaimed. “Nicky called me Pa!”

Hope smiled and decided not to burst her husband’s bubble of delusion. She shifted uncomfortably on the vanity’s stool, hitching her thumb beneath the elastic bust and pulling upwards on her long black dress.

“This costume doesn’t quite fit the same after giving birth,” she said wryly.

John, ever obliging, ogled her cleavage. “It fits even better,” he declared.

She suppressed a pleased grin. “Get Nick in his costume while I finish touching up my warpaint.”

“Yes, mi amor!” John’s Spanish accent had not improved over the years.

After wrestling baby Nick into his pinstripe shirt and tying on his black booties, John picked his son off the bed, cradling him casually in one arm the way that a quarterback might carry a football while running.

“It’s our first Halloween as parents,” John said. “How does it feel?”

Hope reached up and adjusted his moustache, which Nick had tugged halfway down his lip. “Almost perfect.”

“Almost?”

“The Addams family had *two* children.”

[Mind Blind \(Delivery for the Damned?\) Story: Crossing Over](#)

[Oct 30, 2024](#)

Death was painless. Not the part where he died—that had hardcore sucked. The minutes before his demise had been so tortuous that his mind had blocked out the cause, and Nick “awoke” (so to speak) with zero recollection of how he’d died other than the shadowed memory of crushing agony and the sound of a gasp that wanted to be a scream but couldn’t. All he knew for certain was that dying had been painful as hell.

But the bit that came after the dying? Death, unlike life, was blissfully painless. Nick had never realized how much being alive *hurt*. Physically primarily, although his life hadn't been a psychological picnic. Had someone asked Nick the day before his death if he were in pain, he would've answered "no" and been certain that he was telling the truth. Death illuminated the lie, however, as for the first time in Nicholas Wiseman's life he no longer had a headache. He hadn't realized how much his head had always hurt; that dull throb was simply how his head had felt every day since birth with the exception of the occasional migraine so violent that even his oblivious self recognized the pain. But now . . .

It felt like a bad tooth being pulled after years of aching, Nick thought. It sucked, because on the one hand you no longer had a tooth (or, in Nick's case, a life). But the relief compensated for the gap-toothed grin. Nick found that, to his mild surprise, he didn't much mind being dead.

"Such a grim thought, unbecoming the fool!"

On the other hand, it was possible that Nick simply hadn't yet accepted the reality of Being Dead. Being Alive was painful, yes, and quadruply so when one was in the process of dying, but Being Dead was . . .

"He's ignoring you."

Being Dead was forever. Being Dead meant Nick would never joke around with Gray again, and never tease Salome. Never hug his mom or pretend to not hate golf for his dad's birthday. Being Dead meant letting that asshole Kim have the final say on all of their ongoing arguments.

"That's a new level of petty."

Being Dead meant that Nick could no longer protect Button.

"Has a bit of a savior complex, doesn't he? That never ends well."

"Petty and pretentious."

"Sounds like Balti."

"Mostly dead boy! Stop ignoring me."

It was at this point that Nicholas Hyacinth Wiseman, recently deceased, realized that one of the ambient voices which he'd been naturally tuning out was, in fact, directly addressing him. It was the phrase "mostly dead" that did it. Although Nick hadn't found the concept of *being* dead to be particularly distressing, he rankled at the implication that he had somehow failed the task. Nick hadn't wanted to die, but he liked the thought of being perceived as incompetent even less.

"Are you the Grim Reaper?" Nick asked.

The first voice—deep and masculine, with an accent that Nick couldn't place but somehow sounded fake—let out a laugh that echoed through the abyss. "I've been accused of being worse."

"You are worse," muttered one of the other voices.

"Shush," the Grim Reaper ordered before refocusing on Nick. Now that Nick no longer assumed that the voices he heard were ambient thoughts (a ridiculous notion, he realized, that his powers would linger after death), he could sense the entities' attention—although, given the dark nothingness of his surroundings, Nick wasn't quite sure *how* he was able to sense them.

"Are you certain that I'm not dead?" Nick asked suspiciously.

"As I said, you're only *mostly* dead."

"Oh." Nick considered his predicament for a moment. "Like the Dread Pirate Roberts."

"Who?"

"It's a reference to *The Princess Bride*," another voice, soft and hesitant, explained to the Grim Reaper. "A movie. Well, a book originally. But most people have only seen the movie. The book is great, though."

"We can watch the movie later," a third voice added, a soft Irish brogue making even their annoyance sound musical. "First, Baltz needs to deal with the kid."

"I'm working on it," the Grim Reaper grumbled. "Unless someone else would like to take over? Anybody else have the power to bend reality? Anybody? No one? Just me? Then the rest of you kindly *shut up* and let us talk."

Nick assumed that he was the other half of the 'us' mentioned. "How long until I'm proper dead-dead, then?" he asked. "Or are you going to ask for my soul in return for brining me back to life?"

"Why would I want with your soul?" the Grim Reaper demanded indignantly. "I don't deal in cheap wares."

One of the voices (Nick couldn't tell which one) snorted.

"I only meant that you're worthless to me," the Grim Reaper corrected, as if that made his prior statement any more complimentary. "Your death ruins my plans, however, so I'd appreciate you returning." He paused, and Nick once again sensed a penetrating, evaluative gaze somewhere beyond the infinite void where his soul currently resided.

"You *do* want to stay alive, don't you?" the Grim Reaper asked.

Nick opened his mouth (or whatever concept of a mouth he still possessed) to say of *course* he wanted to be brought back to life, but his words were halted by vaguely recalled pain. If he focused past the darkness all around him, he could almost feel the splintering of ribs and burning lungs that awaited in a reality where he could no longer speak.

"Will it hurt?" he asked, despite already knowing the probable answer.

"Humans are always hurting," the Grim Reaper said without much sympathy in his voice. "But I won't return you against your will." He sighed. "It'll be a headache, but I can make . . . adjustments."

Nick hadn't planned on dying, but now that he was dead—correction, *mostly* dead—he wasn't all that eager to return to life, either. Not when his last moments had been so brutally agonizing. He was half-tempted to reject the Grim Reaper's proposition, and yet . . .

He wanted to tease Gray and Sally again. He wanted to hug his parents, and to try baking that tomato soup cake that he'd found in a 1950's cookbook. Eventually, he wanted to adopt a dog. He even wanted to argue with Kim again.

Most of all, Nick wanted to make sure that Button was going to be okay. He wanted to see his sibling happy.

If that meant suffering through whatever trauma was currently breaking his body, so be it.

"Take me back," Nick said. "I have a cake to bake."

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions . . . On Proposals](#)

[Dec 31, 2024](#)

"You mean the world to me, and I want—"

"Cliché."

"You *are* my world, and I—"

"Still cliché."

"I've always yearned—"

"Don't use 'yearn.' It reminds people that you're British."

"I love you. Will you—"

"Just launching straight to it? At least have a little finesse."

"We've been together for over four years, and I think that it's time for us—"

“Button knows how long you’ve been dating, dork.”

“My heart, would you do me the honor of—”

“Too traditional. My sibling deserves something unique.”

“Despite our marriage meaning that I’ll never be rid of your arse of a brother, I still want—”

This time, Gray’s practice speech was cut off by a throw pillow instead of Nick’s critique. Gray managed to levitate the pillow just in time, keeping it suspended about an inch from his nose. After setting the pillow down back on the sofa, he collapsed next to Nick with a frustrated groan.

“I despise you,” Gray informed his best friend in an amiable tone.

Nick smirked. “You’ll adore me again in a moment.”

When Gray kept skeptically quiet, Nick straightened from his slouch.

“I mean it,” Nick said. “Ask me what I did last Saturday.”

“Last Saturday . . . before or after I told you that I was intending to propose, and you spent half an hour obnoxiously chanting ‘I called it!’ over and over again?”

“I did call it,” Nick said with an imperious sniff. “Months before you two ever went on your first date. Call me a Precog because I *knew* that you and Button were made for each other.”

Gray groaned. “I can’t decide whether you’re supportive or simply insufferable.”

“Both,” Nick suggested. “Also devilishly charming. But you still haven’t guessed what I did on Saturday.”

“I don’t know, Nick.” Gray’s voice was heavy with weariness (they’d been brainstorming his proposal for half an hour, and Nick had thus far not let him complete more than two sentences without hurling criticism). “What did you do on Saturday?”

“Guess!” Nick urged.

Grayson groaned again. “You went on a romantic date with Kim.”

“What? No! Why would you guess that? It’s a horrible guess.” Nick shuddered. “Nightmare fuel.”

Grayson closed his eyes and tilted back his head, allowing his body to sink deeper into the comfortably worn leather cushions of Nick’s living room couch. “I’m terrible at guessing,” he said. “Just tell me.”

“Spoilsport.”

Although Gray couldn't see Nick's pout, he had no doubt that it was there. He bit back a retort ("Your sibling thinks that I'm *plenty* of fun") and waited patiently.

"I called in a favor," Nick teased. "A few favors."

Grayson opened a single eye to regard his friend warily. Nick looked altogether too smug for Gray's peace of mind.

"Remember saying how you wanted to propose to Button on the beach where you two had your first date?"

"I also remember telling you why it wouldn't work," Gray replied. "Proposals draw attention. Which means I'll get recognized, and then the whole romantic moment turns into a stressful ordeal."

"The drawback of being hot and famous," Nick said without a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Yes, I know it well. Anyhow, I have a friend, Vivica—"

"The model that you dated back in training?"

"That's her."

"The one who broke up with you because she said you were, and I quote, 'a fratish manchild'?"

Once again, the throw pillow hurtled towards Gray's head. This time he didn't bother to use his powers, blocking it with the back of his hand so that it fell to the floor.

"Yeah, well, she liked me enough to stay friends. And her parents own a vacation home near Assateague Island . . . where they're willing to let you and Button stay for free, which means no paper trail for the press to follow. Apparently, Viv's mom is one of your fans."

"Assateague Island?" Gray frowned. "National park, right? I think it's on my list of places to visit."

"It's a nature sanctuary near Maryland. Quiet, isolated. It may not have the emotional significance of where you two first went official, but it *does* have wild horses. Button would love it."

"We both would," Gray conceded. "Except for the part about it being on the east coast. The last two times I booked plane tickets, the paparazzi ambushed us at baggage claim." He rubbed the back of his neck. "We always manage to escape, but I want everything to be perfect this time. No press, no stress."

"This is where the second favor comes in," Nick said. "Well, the second and third favor. Probably the fourth, too. Adsila basically owns my soul for this, but she's agreed to let you and Button use Unity's private jet."

Gray's eyebrows almost flew off his forehead with shock. "How'd you finagle that?"

“By pointing out that Fortitude’s engagement to another Unity agent should be kept out of the media,” Nick said. “I argued that—” he cleared his throat, and took on a formal tone—“allowances should be made to maintain both of your privacy, since you’re a public figure and Button has been getting recognized as your significant other and my sibling. Adsila may be a hardass, but she protects her people.”

Nick let out a sigh at Gray’s expectant stare. “I also agreed to attend the UN’s next symposium on Ment rights and meet with a minimum of three diplomats of Adsila’s choosing.”

Now, that sounded more like Branham. Gray clasped Nick’s shoulder. “Brother, I appreciate your sacrifice.”

Nick pulled Gray into a full hug, thumping his back with his fist. “You’re not my brother quite yet,” he said with a grin after pulling away. “One last time, let’s go over how you plan on asking my sibling to marry you.”

[MB Saucy Side: Countdown \(Ferro\)](#)

[Dec 31, 2024](#)

“Ten!”

The crowd presses around you, suffocating yet safe. Among the thousands present at Navy Pier to count down the new year, few Ments would be capable of focusing on your thoughts through the noise, or even recognizing that your thoughts were more than just ambient dialogue from the herd.

“Nine!”

Despite knowing logically that the risk of being exposed is minimal, your breath still catches every time your gaze locks with someone else’s in the throng. Are they a Ment? Did they identify you despite the noise? Can they reveal you, hurt you, control you so that you do things that—

“Eight!”

Ferro pulls your hand into the tube of his lime green jacket’s oversized sleeve, giving a reassuring squeeze in welcome reminder that you’re not alone. That someone will have your back and protect you even should the worst come to pass. His hand is warm and kept ungloved despite the temperature dipping below ten degrees.

“Seven!”

Your breath creates white puffs in the night air, and Ferro lets out a low laugh. He pulls you closer, ignoring the disgruntled looks of those he jostles away with the movement, and hugs you within his arms. Your hand is still inside his jacket sleeves, making it impossible to break away. Not that you'd ever want to.

"Six!"

Small fireworks pop off in the distance, smaller Chicago neighborhoods pre-empting the main event. Ferro rests his head on your shoulder, and you lean back against his chest, staring upwards at the still dark expanse of sky over Lake Michigan.

"Five!"

Someone pushes rudely past, causing you to stumble, but Ferro wraps you tighter in his arms and keeps you upright. "Still falling for me, I see," he whispers into your ear. Although he's not actually whispering; it just sounds that way over the crowd's din. There's a laugh in his voice. Ferro's voice always has a laugh held within, and that laugh is one of the reasons you love him.

"Four!"

"I can't believe we're doing this," you say loudly, although Ferro still has to lean in to catch your words. "This so insanely touristy!"

"That's part of the fun!" he replies. You can't hear the beginning of his next sentence over the roar of the crowd but catch the words: "—be tourists together."

"Three!"

"In Atlanta, we drop a giant peach," Ferro says, although you're distracted by the tickly sensation of his lips moving against the shell of your ear. "We'll spend next New Year's down there."

"Was your mom upset that you spent the holidays with my family?" you ask.

"Nah, she's just excited to meet you," Ferro replies. "Especially after I told her that I plan on—"

"Two!"

You don't catch the last half of this sentence, and Ferro's smug smile when you look back at him makes you wonder if he deliberately lowered his voice.

"What was that?" you ask, but Ferro just smiles widely and pretends not to have heard you.

"One!"

Multicolored explosions illuminate the sky as Ferro's lips descend upon yours, and you can't tell which is brighter. You can taste that ever-present laugh in his voice, in the way he playfully bites your lower lip

and flicks his tongue to the corner of your mouth. His kiss is playful, ticklish yet intense, and brighter than any of the fireworks going off above you. Your eyes flutter closed and, although you can still see the bursts of light from behind your lids. You forget the crowd, forget the possibility of danger, and focus only on Ferro's warmth and the taste of his laugh.

[MB Saucy Side: Countdown \(Talía\)](#)

[Dec 31, 2024](#)

"Ten!"

The crowd presses around you, suffocating yet safe. Among the thousands present at Navy Pier to count down the new year, few Ments would be capable of focusing on your thoughts through the noise, or even recognizing that your thoughts were more than just ambient dialogue from the herd.

"Nine!"

Despite knowing logically that the risk of being exposed is minimal, your breath still catches every time your gaze locks with someone else's in the throng. Are they a Ment? Did they identify you despite the noise? Can they reveal you, hurt you, control you so that you do things that—

"Eight!"

Talia pulls your hand into the tube of her lime green jacket's oversized sleeve, giving a reassuring squeeze in welcome reminder that you're not alone. That someone will have your back and protect you even should the worst come to pass. Her hand is warm and kept ungloved despite the temperature dipping below ten degrees.

"Seven!"

Your breath creates white puffs in the night air, and Talia lets out a low laugh. She pulls you closer, ignoring the disgruntled looks of those she jostles away with the movement, and hugs you within both her arms. Your hand is still inside her jacket sleeves, making it impossible to break away. Not that you'd ever want to.

"Six!"

Small fireworks pop off in the distance, smaller Chicago neighborhoods pre-empting the main event. Talia rests her head on your shoulder, and you lean back against her chest, staring upwards at the still dark expanse of sky over Lake Michigan.

“Five!”

Someone pushes rudely past, causing you to stumble, but Talia wraps you tighter in her arms and keeps you upright. “Still falling for me, I see,” she whispers into your ear. Although he’s not actually whispering; it just sounds that way over the crowd’s din. There’s a laugh in her voice. Talia’s voice always has a laugh held within, and that laugh is one of the reasons you love her.

“Four!”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” you say loudly, although Talia still has to lean in to catch your words. “This so insanely touristy!”

“That’s part of the fun!” she replies. You can’t hear the beginning of her next sentence over the roar of the crowd but catch the words: “—be tourists together.”

“Three!”

“In Atlanta, we drop a giant peach,” Talia says, although you’re distracted by the tickly sensation of her lips moving against the shell of your ear. “We’ll spend next New Year’s down there.”

“Was your mom upset that you chose to spend the holidays with my family?” you ask.

“Nah, she’s just excited to meet you,” Talia replies. “Especially after I told her that I plan on—”

“Two!”

You don’t catch the last half of this sentence, and Talia’s smug smile when you look back at him makes you wonder if she deliberately lowered her voice.

“What was that?” you ask, but Talia just smiles widely and pretends not to have heard you.

“One!”

Multicolored explosions illuminate the sky as Talia’s lips descend upon yours, and you can’t tell which is brighter. You can taste that ever-present laugh in her voice, in the way she playfully bites your lower lip and flicks her tongue to the corner of your mouth. Her kiss is playful, ticklish yet intense, and brighter than any of the fireworks going off above you. Your eyes flutter closed and, although you can still see the bursts of light from behind your lids. You forget the crowd, forget the possibility of danger, and focus only on Talia’s warmth and the taste of her ever-present laugh.

“DECK THE HALLS WITH BOUGHS OF HOLLY!” Glitch sang/bellowed, the lyrics echoing off the high ceiling of Aeon’s lobby.

“Fa-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la!” Sally and Nick sang in unison. Unlike Glitch, whose soprano remained surprisingly pleasant despite the fact that she was belting as loudly as possible, neither Sally nor Nick were anywhere close to being in key (Sally because she was utterly tone-deaf; Nick because he found it amusing to harmonize with Sally’s flat notes).

Kent was present as well but refused to sing on account of principle, despite having the best voice amongst the group.

The music stopped as the three carolers (plus Kent) entered the elevator, and promptly resumed once the doors opened on the fifteenth floor.

“DON WE NOW OUR GAY APPAREL!” Glitch sang/hollered.

Several faces poked out of offices to observe the commotion, their expressions quickly turning to wincing at Sally and Nick’s cacophonous chorus. Kent, who had been trailing in the rear, raised a shushing finger to his lips when one of the curious audience members opened their mouth, presumably to ask why the hell Justice and two coworkers were singing Christmas carols.

Glitch eventually halted in front of a still-closed office door near the end of the hallway.

“TROLL THE ANCIENT YULE-TIDE CAROL!” she sang/roared.

The door remained shut through Sally and Nick’s offkey *fa-la-las*.

Glitch knocked in rhythm with the song. “SEE THE BLAZING YULE BEFORE US!” she sang/shouted.

The door remained shut.

“Maybe he’s not back yet,” Sally said.

Nick smirked. “Kim’s inside, just avoiding us.” He raised his voice to a volume almost on par with Glitch’s earlier singing. “You can’t hide forever! Holiday cheer is contagious, Kim!”

Glitch nodded at Kent, who stepped forward. She motioned Nick and Sally to take a step back.

“**STRIKE** THE HARP AND JOIN THE CHORUS!” Glitch sang/yelled.

Kent’s heel struck right next to the lock. With a crunch of wood and metal, the door swung violently inwards, revealing Ambrose Kim’s office.

For a long moment, no one spoke, horrified by the chaos within.

Kim's usually immaculate office was in disarray. Loose papers were strewn across the floor as if a blizzard had gusted through, and a pile of laundry sloppily tilted to one side beneath the desk. Several of Kim's precious books had been taken off their shelves and thrown haphazardly onto the seats of chairs. The window was cracked open, with a navy-blue tie draped over its frame and fluttering in the breeze like a flag of surrender.

"There must've been an intruder," Sally said. "Should we call security?"

"Maybe he jumped," Nick suggested, staring at the window. His smile slipped into a frown as he squinted at the pile of laundry beneath the desk.

"Everyone halt!" Glitch stretched her arm over the doorway, blocking the other's access into the room. "This is a crime scene!"

Kent sighed. "Kim is—"

"Missing!" Glitch proclaimed. "Rosy is tragically missing!"

Kent sighed again. "But—"

"Vanished!" Glitch touched the back of her hand to her forehead as if about to faint. "Rosy was supposed to return today, but he went missing while on vacation! And now his office has been ransacked! Quick, someone call Liam Neeson!"

"He's right—"

"Oh, woe! To have gone missing at such a youngish age! Rest in pieces, sweet Ambrose Kim!"

"Shut up, Parker," ordered the pile of laundry in a hoarse voice.

Ambrose Kim pushed off the three coats that had been covering his body. He gripped the edge of his desk, hauling himself upright to glare grumpily at the four intruders.

Glitch gasped. "Rosy! We all thought that you were dead!" She wretched out a fake sob that sounded adjacent to a chuckle. "What a relief!"

"Is it?" Nick let out a hiss of pain when Sally elbowed his side.

"Why are the four of you in my office?" Ambrose demanded. "And why the hell are you singing Christmas carols?"

"First of all, the others are technically in the hallway just OUTSIDE your office," Glitch corrected. "We're singing because you missed the interoffice holiday party."

“Because you’re a grinch,” Nick chimed in from over Glitch’s shoulder.

Ambrose’s glower deepened, which did nothing to refute Nick’s accusation of grinchdom. “I was on my honeymoon.”

Nick groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“It’s February,” Ambrose said. “You’re being ridiculous.”

Glitch tsked her tongue sadly. “Au contraire, my dear Rosebud. The Holiday Spirit can’t be contained to a single month.”

“Literally, this year,” Sally added. “Hanukkah didn’t end until January.”

“Which again, was over a month ago,” Ambrose pointed out. “So, what the hell are you all doing here?”

“We wanted to welcome you back!” Glitch’s lips curved in a toothy smile. “Well, *I* wanted to welcome you. Nick and Sally wanted to annoy you.”

Sally nodded, while Nick became suddenly preoccupied with inspecting the potted orchid on the bookshelf.

Ambrose stared expectantly at Kent, who shrugged. “I was bored.”

“None of you are acknowledging the real issue, here,” Sally interjected. “Why was Kim sleeping under his desk instead of at home?”

“Already fighting with your spouse?” Nick asked, sounding inappropriately hopeful. “Could things be heading to a divorce in the near future?”

Sally’s elbow shot out again, but this time Nick dodged.

“Things at home are perfect.” Ambrose’s expression and tone both softened as his mind went to his partner. “More than perfect.” Glitch hid a grin under her hand at the sudden display of vulnerability, while Kent and Sally averted their eyes politely. Nick, however, gagged loudly.

“If things at home are perfect, then why are you using spare coats as blankets?” Nick demanded. “And why hasn’t Button come back to the office?” He took a step into the office, shoving past Glitch. “What have you done with them?”

“A lot of things, I suspect,” Glitch murmured to Kent, who rolled his eyes but couldn’t suppress a smirk.

“You two talked on the phone just yesterday,” Ambrose told Nick.

“I’m not buying their ‘working from home’ excuse!” Nick almost shouted. “Especially not when something is clearly off with you.”

Ambrose crossed his arms. "My marriage is none of your business."

"It is when you're married to my sibling!"

"Exactly!" Kim snapped back. "We're *married*. We just returned *from our honeymoon*. To our *workplace*. Where you, their *brother*, and every other Ment can . . ."

". . . Can read Button's mind," Sally finished, glancing at Nick with horrified amusement. "Give it a rest, Nicholas. You know exactly what Button is going to be thinking about nonstop."

Glitch wagged her eyebrows, never one content to leave to subtly what could be awkwardly stated out loud. "They'll probably be thinking about this past month. This very *romantic* past month."

"We would prefer to keep some things private," Ambrose said stiffly.

Nick, whose complexion had grown increasingly pale throughout the conversation, stared longingly back down the hallway as if he were contemplating bolting. "Button is avoiding me?" he asked in an unsteady voice.

"Until they can stop themselves from reminiscing about Corfu, yes," Ambrose said.

"What happened in Corfu?" Sally asked before her cheeks deepened in a ruddy blush. "Never mind. I can imagine."

"Please don't," Ambrose requested.

"I can understand why Button may want space—it's not the first time that they needed to keep their distance," Nick begrudgingly admitted. "But that doesn't explain why they kicked **you** out of the house."

"No one was kicked out," Ambrose retorted. "I took a leave of absence for almost two months. Despite Black's best efforts, that's two months where *you* were submitting most of UCRT's paperwork."

Nick flinched. "I did my best."

"Your best' is still sloppy enough to leave me with a backlog of corrections longer than the train ride we took to Naples. Somewhere after the fourth stack of paperwork, I had to rest my eyes."

"Under your desk?" Sally asked.

Ambrose glared at the group. "I had hoped that any *intruders* would assume that no one was here and depart."

"And the reason it looks like a hurricane passed through here?" Glitch prodded.

Ambrose hesitated, looking uncharacteristically uneasy.

Nick snickered. "I forgot about that," he said.

"What did you do this time?" Sally asked, clearly preparing herself to be exasperated.

Nick muttered something in a voice so low that only Sally was able to discern the words. Her eyes grew round. "You did WHAT?" she shrieked. "Nicholas Hyacinth Wiseman, what is WRONG with you?"

Despite not having heard Nick's confession, Sally's reaction was enough to confirm something for Ambrose. He marched towards his brother-in-law with murderous intent and grabbed the front of Nick's shirt to yank the taller man down to face-level.

"Where did you hide it?" Ambrose demanded. "So help me God, Nick, I will—"

Nick blinked at Ambrose. "You called me Nick."

"Answer the question!"

"You hardly ever call me by my first name," Nick said. "Ambrose, are you warming up to me?"

Ambrose's emitted a growl from the back of his throat. "Where. Is. My. Marriage. License."

"You stole their marriage license?" Glitch would've applauded, had she not been certain that doing so would've resulted in her murder by Ambrose. "How'd you finagle such a gloriously devious deed?"

"There was nothing glorious about it," Ambrose spat out. "HR needed it for insurance. I brought in the original to make a copy but left it on my desk before we left for Greece."

"Ambrose Kim made a mistake?" Glitch let out a Broadway-worthy gasp. "Say it isn't so!"

"When I got back, the certificate was gone," Ambrose said. "We worried that the press had somehow stolen it, but instead—" His grip on Nick's shirtfront tightened and grit out, "Where is it?"

Oof. Usually, Glitch was all for proclaiming one's love to the world loud and proud, but she understood why Ambrose would be worried about the media learning about his marriage to Wiseman. The secretive youngest child of Unity's premier family, married to their former instructor with a questionable past as a mercenary? It wouldn't be good for Unity's optics, and the less attention Wiseman drew, the safer they'd be from Ments like . . .

Well, sometimes love conquered everything, but other times it was best to keep marriage certificates out of unauthorized hands.

"Wonderful prank, truly, but you should probably return the paper before Rosy has a heart attack," Glitch told Nick. "He's too youngish to die."

Nick, haven shaken himself free from Ambrose's angry grasp, scratched the back of his neck awkwardly. "About that . . ."

“Oh no,” Sally groaned. “*Please* don’t say what I think you’re about to say.”

Nick’s shoulders hunched inward, and he gave Sally a droopy-eyed look that was suitably abashed and only a little performative. “I was keeping it safe in my office, I swear! But I think it must’ve gotten mixed up with some of my reports meant for Ambrose,” he said. “It’s why I agreed to storm his office when Glitch suggested it.”

“You were hoping to find the marriage certificate and then pretend that you’d never lost it to begin with,” Glitch summarized, shaking her head. “Are you a genius or an idiot?”

“Both,” Sally answered on Nick’s behalf. She sighed, grabbing Kent’s upper arm when he tried to slink off unnoticed. She glanced over at Ambrose. “We’ll help. How many more piles of paperwork to comb through?”

“Eight,” Ambrose replied. “Pray that you kept some of that holiday spirit. You’ll need it in order to get through Nick’s terrible mission summaries.”

[Mind Blind: The Final Updates](#)

[January 31](#)

First of all, Mind Blind demo is up and moved:

<https://cogdemos.ink/play/bardictype/mind-blind-dungeon-demo>

What’s in this New Demo:

- Escape from the basement, with various ways to injure Andy/Liz while doing so (my favorite actually requires that Button fail a certain check, so please play around and don’t be afraid of suboptimizing your stats).
- Discover the consequences of being a klutz (or of having too high an Effort Score).
- Reunite with Operation Hemera.
- Have a minor freakout over your mother (possibly) having returned to Chicago.
- Decide which is more important: your brother or Vengeance.

-Novers also have one final chance to not be Cain to Nick's Abel, if so desired (Grayson can get REALLY mad at this point, which was fun to write).

The new demo includes the post-Chapter 15 route of following \${Kent} into the tunnel, up until Vengeance-Route Chapter 18 and Normal-Route Chapter 17. (Don't be taken aback by the shorter chapter counts: a lot more is included, but the chapters are now longer. If they seem too long, please let me know, as the merging was a recent change to try to tidy up all of the end's branching.)

The normal route (aka following Kenzie down the tunnel in Chapter 15) includes ONLY the version where Button refused Shard's help, however, as Shard's assistance streamlines the entire dungeon escape, and I really want feedback on what is essentially a stricter version of the Aeon closet assignment (does it work, is it fun, do you have any other ideas on how to maim Andy/Liz?). It won't break your game to accept Shard's help in Chapter 14, but the scenes from mid-Chapter 15 on will play out as if you declined it.

February Schedule, Because This Is The End:

Feb 3rd: Chapters 15 – 17 – Vengeance failstate route and the escape-out-the-window route.

Feb 6th: Chapters 15 – 17 Shard's help route.

Feb 10th: Chapters 18 and 19 for the "Save Nick" end route.

Feb 17th: Chapters 18 and 19 for the "Pursue Vengeance" end route.

Feb 21th: Chapters 18 – 19 for the "Join Vengeance" ending.

Feb 28th: All Shard-identity reveal endings (chapters 18-20), as well as a cover art reveal. (Yes, Shard gets an additional chapter all to themselves, because they're special.)

March will be epilogue stories and beta testing, as well as accessibility mode and the new visuals/chapter screens (courtesy of my friend, Summer, who is way better at making things look pretty than I am).

It's been over five years since I started writing *Mind Blind* (!!!), and there were multiple setbacks in my personal life and inside my personal head that sadly slowed things down, but we're finally at the finish line! For real this time, with a set in stone schedule (even if I die in a freak ice cream truck collision, my sibling has instructions on how to go through with publication).

Thank you for everyone who reached out to let me know about dashingdon's closure, and I'm sorry for not getting back to you. I apologize for not being as active in general as I want to be, and please know that all your support, both moral and monetary, has really been a lifeline. These past couple years have been, to put it in the most understated way possible, difficult. As I've been open about before, *Mind Blind* is inspired by my diagnosis with agoraphobia, and I still struggle with being "seen," so to speak, when things go badly.

But things are going better. Mind Blind is finished. After multiple surgeries, my mom has bounced back from Stage 4 cancer (so the odds can go kick rocks).

Also, I got a dog.



[Achievements \(And a demo bugfix\).](#)

[February 2](#)

The Patreon demo will now correctly go to the next scene after escaping the lab (chapter17K was accidentally written as chapter17k in the code, and that broke everything because coding is evil).

As an apology for the bug, here's *Mind Blind*'s complete list of 47 achievements, all of which are named except for Interpersonal Button's because I cannot for the life of me think of something quippy and clever. (Please provide suggestions, I beg y'all.)

If there's any achievements that you'd like to see, feel free to let me know on this post or in the discord. I wouldn't mind having an even 50.

(Warning: May contain light spoilers)

Sound of Silence - Took The EI to Aeon

Ambulatory Broadcast - Walked to Aeon

Shih Tzu Savior - Doubled back to save the dogs

Should've Seen That Coming - Lost Chapter 2's Assignment

Go For The Eyes, Sally! - Sprayed Nox with hot sauce

Kind of a Bitch Move - Weaponized Nox's love for his/her dogs

Make Pancakes Not War - Negotiated with Glitch using your breakfast

Curse of Cassandra - Nox didn't believe Sally's "vision"

Puppy Love - Romanced Kent/Kenna

Coded For Each Other - Romanced Glitch

Maria - Learned what happened to Kenzie's mother

Angel on My Shoulder - Learned Glitch's secret

Level 99 Dumbass - Learned how Gray got his scar

Ideal Lover - Romanced Grayson

Monochromatic - Have a longstanding crush on Gray Black despite his stupid name

Our Future is Bright - Romanced Sally

Rosy-Colored Glasses - Romanced a very reluctant Kim

Ment To Be - Found love with a Ment

Best Friend's Brother - Encouraged Sally and Nick to get together

Brother's Best Friend 2.0 - Romanced Grayson while setting up Nick and Sally

Love Triangle Try-hard - Developed a crush on both Kenzie and Glitch

Questionable Taste in Life - Crushed on Reese, Andy/Liz, and Shard in a single playthrough

Nose Nibbler - Bite Andy/Liz's nose

Right Hand(less) Man - Break Andy/Liz's hand

That Blows - Use the airpen on Andy/Liz

Writing on the Wall - Discovered How Shard Got In Touch With Vengeance

Mayoral Misdeeds - Pieced together Tobias's involvement

Easy as 123(45) - Correctly guessed the code to Vengeance's safehouse

The Fanboy - Located Vengeance's safehouse with Caleb's help

Turncoat Prophet - Located Vengeance's safehouse with Isaiah's help

The Crack in the Closet - Discovered Shard's identity

Hope Fulfilled - Reunited with your mother

Zero Saves Hero - Saved your brother

Three Wisemen - Saved Nick with the help of both your parents

Fight The (Un)Power(ed) - Took down Vengeance

Deal with the Devil - Struck a bargain for which Kenzie will never forgive you

The King is Dead, Long Live the Executioner - Took over Vengeance

All Things Must Come To An End - Ended the game with over 90 Morbidity

Finger Guns Forever - Ended the game with over 90 Humor

Viva la Protagonist - Ended the game with over 90 Confidence

Humor Like Coffee - Ended the game with over 50 in both Morbidity and Humor

Hot Topic - Ended the game with over 50 in both Morbidity and Confidence

Your Own Laughtrack - Ended the game with over 50 in both Humor and Confidence

Edison-Edition Button - Ended the game with over 70 in Innovation

Inspector Button - Ended the game with over 70 in Insightful

???? - Ended the game with over 70 in Interpersonal

Built Different - Ended the game with max Effort

[Demo Update: Evil Button, The Failure](#)

[February 3](#)

Now up: The pathway where Button fails to win over either Boris or Andy/Liz (until the end of Chapter 17V2). I also implemented the actual requirements to enter the Vengeance path as will be in the full game, to make sure that the scenes are cohesive on playthroughs. Sorry, folks, but your super accepting sunshine-and-rainbows, Nick-is-the-best Buttons will no longer be able to attempt to take over Vengeance.

I don't think the requirements are that difficult to achieve! But if you play through as a future evil overlord, and the Vengeance Route is *not* an option when you think it should be, please let me know as I'm always happy to tweak stats. (Likewise, let me know if covering for Kenzie is too easy in the Tunnel Route, as I'm currently playing around with that variable as well.)

In order to pursue the Vengeance Route, there are five requirements: you need Resentful to be above 75% and for your relationship with Nick to be below 130 (the relationship has to have at least little tension for you to want to join hands with his archnemesis, after all). You also need to have spoken to Juliette at the party. Finally, there are two hidden stats, Vengeance and Unity, both which initially start out as 50. You need over 70 in Vengeance and under 30 in Unity, something which is pretty easily done

by selecting the option ". . . I've finally found my people" during Chapter 8's Podium creation bit, and then being sympathetic to Vengeance members at the party.

The Escape-Out-The-Window route will be up as soon as it no longer ruins Rosy's romance (I added in a new variable, Amutual, to account for a wrong notification that was reported to show in the relationship screen, and for some reason Button can now no longer flee from the safehouse without Rosy falling out of love).

Demo Link: <https://cogdemos.ink/play/bardictype/mind-blind-dungeon-demo>

(Spoilers ahead)

For those of you disinterested in playing Evil Button (and yes, wanting to take over an extremist terrorist group is evil), below is my personal favorite scene from the failure path. Exclusive to smitten Buttons who chose extremely questionable options in earlier chapters, I not-so-proudly present the snippet below:

Maybe you don't have to join Vengeance. Maybe it's enough to be by Reese's side.

"Reese, I—"

"I almost second-guessed Andrew's judgement, you know," Reese talks over you. "After all, recruiting \${Name} Wiseman would be quite the coup!"

"We can still—"

"Then I remembered that you betrayed me," Reese continues, "and that hurt. I may be Vengeance's leader, \${Name}, but I do have feelings."

"I also have feelings for—"

"People don't realize how hard it is to be responsible for everything," Reese rants. "I need to surround myself with those I trust. To have a refuge."

"I would love to be your—"

"But alas!" Reese cries out dramatically. "It is my fate to lead Vengeance to glory, and being alone is the burden which I must bear."

[New Demo Link, Brought To You By Shard](#)

[February 7](#)

First off: Scroll down for the new demo link! Files with the same name weren't updating for some reason, so I just made a new link to avoid any issues. The old link still works, but it doesn't have both Tunnel Versions.

Shard's pathway is now open until the split branch in Chapter 17 where you choose either to go after Vengeance or Nick. For this route to trigger, accept Shard's help to find Nick in Chapter 14, then follow Kenzie down the tunnel in Chapter 15. You should know immediately upon waking up in the lab whether or not you're on Shard's route. If it reads identical to the normal underground lab scene, then something has gone wrong and the code needs to be fixed again (and I need to go sob into a pillow).

You may be able to guess Shard's identity based on info from this chapter. Maybe you know Shard's identity already. Either way, please keep that secret hush-hush with the exception of spoiler tags in the discord channel.

Prior saves may or may not work.

NEW DEMO LINK: <https://cogdemos.ink/play/bardictype/mind-blind-shard>

Also! You can also now escape out the window! This was updated a few days ago but I forgot to make the post (whoops). To my dearest Sally fans: I am sorry. I am so very, very sorry. Please believe me when I say that writing this hurt me just as much as reading it may hurt you. Originally the Window Route was focused on rescuing Kenzie, but this changed two months back after an alpha-tester brought it to my attention that having a Kenzie just rehash Reese's plan ended up being boring (and a poorer alternative to having to escape). I needed a natural way to let the readers know Vengeance's plot, and having **REDACTED** do **REDACTED** because **REDACTED** felt much more natural (and also gives non-Vengeance Buttons a way to experience parts of the Vengeance route).

Some people are reporting bug issues with early chapters breaking, which I've been unable to duplicate. My suspicion is that ongoing games are borking either because I've been updating the startup file semi-frequently in order to iron out kinks, or because the chapter images are taking too long to load (I might take them out next update link, since the published game will have new chapter slides anyway).

If you encounter a bug, please restart the game from the beginning without using a save to see if the issue persists after choosing the same choices. Switching browsers may also work if you're loath to sacrifice your savefile. I realize restarting is a hassle, but it will allow me to rule out the previous issues that I mentioned, and I'll be able to fix whatever line of code is breaking things. The code *should* be solid, but I also can't count the number of times where I've broken everything because I deleted an unnecessary adjective in a chapter and accidentally included an additional space, and thus the entire game was rendered unplayable.

If you encounter any typos, grammar errors, or just bad writing, please report that as well to either this post or the feedback channel on the discord. (My current task is combing through the text and trying to

take out half of the head nods, because I resort to characters nodding when I'm tired. Some scenes, I swear the cast become bobbleheads.)

Finally, here's a picture of Button. Why? Just because.



[Wherefore Art Thou Juliette](#)

[February 7](#)

A few people have mentioned not being able to meet Juliette in Chapter 10, so here are a few tips and tricks:

1. Use an Interpersonal Button. Having over 50 Interpersonal makes Vengeance like you more (making all the stat checks easier) and also makes Button a better liar (which means certain dialogues that you would usually be dinged on instead are believed without penalty, like claiming that you have bunions or pretending to drink).
2. Be consistent with your Podium backstory. Claiming that your hatred of Unity motivated the bombing, for example, will make AL suspicious if your Podium profile has Button's primary grudge as against their family.
3. Listen and empathize with every Vengeance member's story. You can still internally condemn their actions, but AL picks up on genuine empathy (ex: "That doesn't excuse her actions, but I feel for her.").
4. Don't be afraid to let Kenzie do the talking. They're surprisingly good at bullshitting their way through things.
- 5) Instead of being good at your job, you can alternatively just get Andy/Liz to crush on you. Flirt, act like a stereotypical Teen Movie Mean Girl (I stand by this term being gender neutral), and don't get too cozy with Kenzie in front of them. If AL thinks you're a cutie patootie, they'll introduce you to Jules even if you fail the required "heretoparty" stat check.

[Mind Blind: The First Ending, Now Up \(Until the very end, y'all. For realsies.\)](#)

[February 23](#)

First off, I am so so so sorry for the delay to schedule! There were more bugs than I anticipated in the newly released sections, and then I had an idea (Chapter 18's circular narration, to mimic Button literally running out of options), and then I had ANOTHER idea (which was to reveal Nick's secret in this ending as well, instead of locking it behind Shard's motives). I know, I know. I need to stop having new ideas when the pixilated ink is already on the virtual paper. But I'm actually pretty happy with how the rework turned out—even though this ending doesn't reveal Shard's identity, which was MB's driving mystery, I

feel that Button learning about Nick still makes it emotionally satisfying even though some questions remained unanswered.

The tiny loose threads are dealt with in the epilogues, by the way, like what happened on the mission that you didn't choose (in this case, going after Vengeance with Kenzie and Glitch). The epilogues are 90% fluff with the characters that you're closest to, in order to let you breathe a little after the breakneck pace of the final chapters (which is a very deliberate pace, but please let me know if any areas need to be slowed down for emotional impact).

Demo Link Is The Same As Before: <https://cogdemos.ink/play/bardictype/mind-blind-shard>

Saves may or may not work, but to be safe I would only use one before Chapter 15.

What This Ending Includes:

This ending is the "Save Nick" version that occurs if you don't accept Shard's help in Chapter 14, when you also make choices that indicate you DON'T want to meet with Hope (either because Button has a bad relationship with their mother, or because they're still afraid of her).

The ending will play out automatically should you select to go save Nick regardless of choices, but those are the choices that you'll need to make for it to make narrative sense. (Otherwise, John will do things like teleport from the library to a plane, and that's not one of his Ment abilities.)

Two other "Save Nick" endings exist, one of which will happen if you accept Shard's help, and another version which has Hope present. None of these endings are necessarily best—this version, for example, has the most Grayson! And I love Grayson, especially when he's being a showoff. I'm aiming to release the Hope-Save-Nick ending either today or tomorrow, depending on how many bugs that I need to fix for this latest update. Then the Vengeance pathways go up, and then finally all of Shards nonsense. (Oh, Shard. I adore you, truly, glorious trainwreck that you are.)

Feedback That I'd Really, Really, Really Appreciate Getting Back After You Play (Contains Spoilers):

1. Does the way that the BRS work make sense? Does the psychic stuff make sense in general?
2. Your opinion on Nick's inner self. Originally, it was different but I liked the role reversal of older and younger sibling.
3. Does the ending work? What about the decision to end on a choice instead of text?
4. Is the fake out funny or obnoxious? (You'll know it when you get there.)
5. Was the romance content with Gray satisfying? (I know that Sally gets a little sidelined in this ending, but she also really gets to shine in the "Go Out The Window" pathway that I'll patch in with the Vengeance endings. Every RO has an ending where they get to play the largest role.)
6. Did you feel like there was enough reactivity to your relationships? (Especially with Nick and John.)

7. Is there ANYTHING that doesn't make sense? I'm not gonna lie, y'all, it's rough going trying to describe a nontangible mindscape.

How To Report Bugs/Typos/Suggestions:

Please screenshot the page if possible (if not possible, please just make sure to include all the other information). Let me know the chapter number, and preferably what choices you made leading up to the error.

Bugs/Typos/Suggestions may be reported on the discord channel, or you can just comment on this post if that's easier.

[Gray's Epilogue Update](#)

[February 24](#)

After receiving feedback about the ending, I've decided to add one of the epilogues to the current demo so that you guys can get a better idea of how the story wraps up! I think it'll be more enjoyable to read this way, plus I'll be able to receive more informed feedback about whether or not the ending feels satisfying and if all plot threads feel neatly (or messily) tied with a bow.

This epilogue is also Gray's romance epilogue, keeping with the theme of this ending being the one where Gray gets the most pagetime. Your Button wasn't romancing Grayson? Well, they are now. (Sorry.)

This epilogue assumes that Button:

- Romanced Grayson (and doesn't want to break up)
- Refused Shard's help
- Doesn't want to see their mom ever again
- Has a good relationship with Sally (above 90)

If those aren't the choices made in your playthrough, there will be inconsistencies but it shouldn't seriously break anything. Other epilogue versions exist if those variables are different, but I have a soft spot for the Spatula conversation so that's the one I'm putting up first for feedback.

Spatula.

Link: <https://cogdemos.ink/play/bardictype/mind-blind-shard>

. . . Also, I would like to thank people on discord for having a conversation about the Vengeance safehouse. It reminded me to finally change my automatic doorknob code. (Yes. It was exactly what you're thinking. And, also yes, it has been that code since I originally wrote the scene.)

[Nick Wiseman Has Opinions On Baked Goods](#)

[February 28](#)

AKA Nick's List of Ten Things He's Baked, Ranked From Least To Most Favorite

10. Baumkuchen (German spit cake, but baked in the oven and not on a spit because I'm not a lunatic)

What happens when the devil comes to earth and manifests himself as a baked good. A pain in the ass to make and doesn't even have a flavor payoff because it's pretty bland. Needs to be babysat in the oven because you broil *Every. Single. Layer.* before brushing on the next one (so that the cake resembles tree rings when cut, which is cool but not worth several hours of your life that could've been spent baking cinnamon rolls).

Overall not worth the effort, especially when it turns out that the new German hire for whom you made it is actually from Finland.

9. Cupcakes

Just bake a real cake, man. If you bake a cake, you can size your portions based on the day that you've had. Just need a pick-me-up? Have a small sliver. Forced to interact with Kim for an hour? Recover from the trauma with a full quarter of the cake. Cupcakes are for children under sugar restrictions by their parents, not for adults trying to recover from the emotional damage inflicted by A-Is-For-Asshat Kim. Oh, and did I mention how obnoxious it is that everyone always expects cupcakes to look like the versions pictured on social media? I refuse to make something look "pretty" at the expense of a proper icing-to-cake mouthfeel ratio.

Conclusion: Cupcakes are acceptable for a school bake sale, but otherwise a subpar version of the real thing.

Secondary Conclusion: Would also be a good nickname for Kim to mock his lack of height. Need to try it out.

8. Regular Butter Cake

Versatile. Fun to decorate, and even more fun to experiment with flavors (Siracha Devil Cake, my delicious brainbaby). Capable of celebrating and being served anywhere, from birthdays to funerals. So easy to bake that even Gray can (almost) do it.

7. Racuchy (Polish pancakes)

I got this recipe from my new favorite neighbor, whose grandparents owned a Polish bakery. Racuchy can be made savory or sweet, but Zarneki's recipe has an apple stuffing that makes them taste like an old fashioned fritter in flapjack form. Amazing by themselves but life-changing when smothered in maple syrup. My new favorite breakfast food with a side of extra-crispy bacon for protein (this body doesn't build itself).

6. Brownies

Chocolate cake ascended to a higher calling. The texture? Multifaceted, a crackly top combined with a moist gooey center and perfect amount of chew. The taste? Chocolate. Better with walnuts, but Salome is mildly allergic to tree nuts, and since she's always here visiting Button and stealing everything that her sticky fingers can grab, I usually make them without.

Brownies are Salome's favorite, but that's NOT why I make them so frequently. They're just tasty.

5. Baklava

So delicious. So sticky. I'm still cleaning thyme honey off my counter from the last time I made this two months ago. Also made a version that uses maple syrup instead so that Glitch could have some, and it was pretty damn amazing despite my usual skepticism of vegan substitutions.

I make my own phyllo dough from scratch, so I don't make baklava often. That shit is time consuming.

4. Tiramisu

Tiramisu, my beloved. Tiramisu, the bane of my existence. How hard can it be to layer ladyfingers and mascarpone cream? The recipe is seriously easy. Yet no matter how much I tweak ingredient ratios, my version always comes out a bland imitation of the godlike perfection served by Mario at Sofia's. He refuses to share his recipe, claiming that if he did then I would never eat at his restaurant anymore, which he can't allow because Gray and I account for almost half of his lunch sales.

Maybe I'll ask Button to break into Mario's safe and steal his recipe book. The beard worked once.

3. Strawberry Rhubarb Pretzel Salad Pie

The most Midwestern thing in my repertoire, a gelatinous abomination of sweet, salty, and sour that shouldn't work but somehow does. My mom's own recipe, brought out for dessert after guests have forced themselves to choke down her homecooked dinner (my dad is a great chef, but Mom always insisted on "helping" him in the kitchen whenever they held a dinner party). No one ever wanted to try it,

and who can blame them? It's a dark red Jello salad pie, and Mom used to add black food coloring to the whipped cream so that the pie looked "cool."

Once folks mustered up the courage to take that first bite, though, their entire pie slice disappeared in under ten seconds. Mom used to save Button and me two slices in the fridge before serving it to guests, otherwise there never would've been any left over for us the next day. Button once dunked their whole face into the pie before it had set, it's that delicious. Dad still has the photos.

I stay faithful to Mom's version, even down to the black food coloring. That way, I can always tell who's stolen a piece by their stained tongue.

2. Cinnamon Rolls

Grayson's default favorite because he always says "make whatever you want" when I ask him what I should bake. And I always want to bake cinnamon rolls.

Sohvi taught me how to make the Finnish version of cinnamon rolls, Korvapuustit, as an apology for the Baumkuchen. They're made from rolled cardamom sweetbread and are—dare I say it—almost as good as my original recipe. But nothing tops my maple coffee glaze.

(I use a lot of maple syrup when baking, because maple syrup is fricking ambrosia. And now I'm thinking about Kim again. Gross. I need mouthwash but like for my brain.)

1. Button's Favorite Cookies

At the end of the day, baking isn't really about eating the result (although that part is awesome). Baking is about dedicating time and effort to share something with the people you love because you know it will make them smile. Makes sense, I guess, that my favorite thing to bake is what gets me the biggest smile from my sib.

Usually these cookies get that cute happy grin that I'm aiming for, although sometimes Button'll hiss like a drenched cat and growl that they don't need any cookies because "NiCk, I'M nOt a cHiLD!" (As if only kids like cookies? Whatever.) No matter how Button reacts, though, I always come back to the kitchen twenty minutes later to find half the batch gone. Knowing that I've sweetened their day, even just a little? That's the best feeling in the world, and the reason that I bake.

[Mind Blind's Cover Art](#)

[February 28](#)

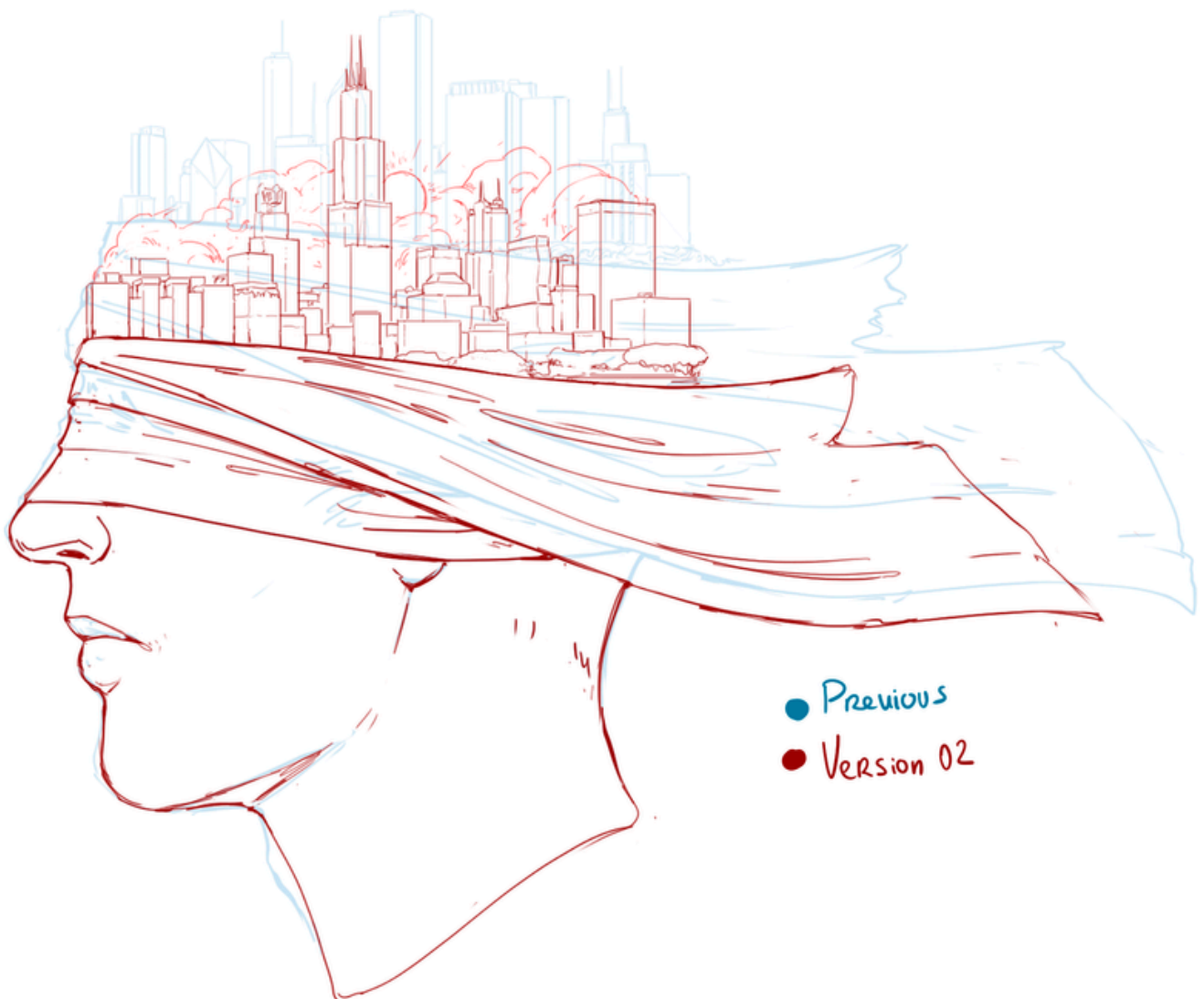
The amazing artist who I'm working with requested a time extension for the final product, but I figured that I'd still share the proposal drafts that she's provided for Mind Blind's cover art. I'm actually just about to send off a message to her about things to possibly tweak (thinning the neck a little, for example, so that the face reads as younger/weaker).

Please let me know what you guys think so that I can potentially incorporate it into my feedback!

I have zero art knowledge so it can be difficult for me to articulate how aspects could be improved.

I've had the idea for Mind Blind's cover art for a long time, and the artist has done an incredible job of giving it form (although there are still some tweaks that I'd like made). The brainclouds were a recent addition, but I'm honestly kinda loving them.

Most Recent Proposal (with brainclouds, superimposed over the old proposal):



Version Without Brainclouds (Let me know if you guys like this one better!):



[Mind Blind What-If: The Dog Ate It](#)

[February 28](#)

“Allow me to ascertain that I have this straight,” Ambrose says, pinching the bridge of his nose in effort to ward off a migraine. “A member of Vengeance gave you a flash drive.”

“Correct,” you confirm.

“A flash drive which, according to this same Vengeance member, contained information about Justice.”

You nod.

“Yet somehow, in a stunning display of gross incompetence, you’ve lost it.”

“In my defense,” you retort, angrier with yourself than Ambrose could ever be, “I gave it to Kent for safekeeping before I was kidnapped.”

Ambrose’s glare slides several inches to your right, where Kent has begun slowly backing his way towards The Station’s elevator.

“I see,” Ambrose says coldly. “Nox?”

Kent mutters something, and Ambrose’s expression chills from icy to glacial. “*Where* is the usb drive?” he demands. “I must have misheard you.”

Kent shoots you a pleading look, but you cross your arms, not about to jump to your partner’s defense after he lost something that could’ve potentially helped rescue Nick. You expected that Kent would have spent the half hour that Andy abducted you in a frantic search. But no. Instead of desperately trying to get you back, Kent had casually popped back to his house in order to take out his dogs.

“Repeat your statement, Nox,” Ambrose orders when Kent remains silent.

Your gaze locks with Kent’s before he looks guiltily away. He mutters something once more, and Ambrose takes a menacing step forward.

“Which dog?” Ambrose asks with a thunderous frown.

“Cassandra,” Kent replies. “The vet said that it should pass naturally. I gave her a teaspoon of fish oil, which should help—”

Ambrose holds up a hand to cut him off. “And where is this dog now?”

“Talia is watching her back at my place, sir.”

“How long until we can . . . recover the usb?”

“Likely within a few hours, sir,” Kent says. “Cassandra’s a small dog.”

* * * *

Six hours later, the flashdrive is still within the belly of the beast. Ambrose banished you and Kent from The Station, ordering that neither of you return until the usb had been . . . recovered.

“And send Parker back,” Ambrose had crankily ordered. “I need her running voice recognition on Vengeance, not . . .” He pinched the bridge of his nose once again and sighed. “Just tell Parker to return.”

With Glitch having left for Aeon, it falls to you and Kent to keep vigil. Cassandra, alas, has proven disinclined to cooperate with your schedule. She and Antigone are laying between you and Kent on the couch, both on their backs, their paws jutting straight into the air as if being held up by a Wild West sheriff. Antigone’s legs move as if running—maybe in her dreams, she’s finally able to get to the ball before her sister.

“I’m sorry,” Kent says, his voice heavy with regret. “I know how important your brother is to you.”

“It’s not as if you ate it yourself.” You try to keep your tone lighthearted, but worry shades your jest. “Dogs are gonna dog. Nothing we can do about it.”

“Even so, I’m sorry.”

Cassandra lets out a sound that’s half-snore, half-whimper, and Kent rests a placating hand on her exposed belly. Still asleep, she curls her paws around his hand in an awkward hug.

Despite her actions having potentially jeopardized Nick’s life, it’s impossible for you to be angry at an animal that’s so utterly adorable.

* * * *

Eight hours later, and it’s now three am. The sun has long since set, and Antigone is still curled up in her bed fast asleep.

You and Kent stand in his backyard, waiting for Cassandra to stop sniffing her own posterior. Impatiently waiting because, to reiterate, it’s three am in the goddamn morning.

Kent squats down beside Cassandra. He snaps his fingers in front of her, his pale skin even paler in the bluish lighting of your cellphone’s flashlight.

“Focus, girl!” he encourages. “Do your business!”

Cassandra stares at him, blinks slowly, then resumes sniffing her backside.

“Please do your business?” Kent asks.

Cassandra doesn’t even dignify his request with a sideways glance.

Kent stands back up with a defeated sigh. “We’ll try again in another hour.”

Nine hours later, at four am, you and Kent attempt to coax Cassandra from her bed to the backyard. She refuses to budge and snaps at Kent’s hands when he attempts to pick her up.

* * * *

Eleven hours later, at six am, you and Kent celebrate as Cassandra's back hunches.

She farts, loudly, but the key to Nick's salvation remains unrecoverable.

* * * *

Twelve hours later. Seven am. Your eyes burn from staying awake all night, and your neck aches from looking downwards at a dog who is indifferent to your suffering.

Cassandra cares naught for your brother's life. Her cruel whims snatched away Caleb's gift, and now she refuses to return it. You have never hated something so adorable before, but Cassandra?

Initially, you were deceived by the cheery yellow hairbow and cutely lolling tongue. No longer.

This beast is the spawn of Cerberus.

"Come on, Cassie," Kent begs. "Do your business."

Cassandra trots back inside the house with the indifference of a cruel god ignoring the prayers of her supplicants. She paws at her food bowl and shoots Kent an expectant look, demanding that he appease her with an offering of kibble.

Kent complies, seasoning her food with another half-teaspoon of salmon oil.

* * * *

After thirteen hours at Kent's house, you have determined that no, all dogs do NOT go to heaven. Cassandra has already dragged you down to the pits of hell.

You and Kent take her for a walk around the neighborhood ("to get things moving," Kent says). Annie is still sleeping, which is what you also desperately yearn to be doing after having gone over twenty-four hours without so much as a cat nap.

You and Kent circle the block once, to no avail. You didn't think that you could ever hate an adorable little animal, but Cass is no longer adorable in your eyes. She is evil personified, the most disagreeable mutt in existence. The world would've been a better place had her mother been spayed.

(Maybe you're being melodramatic, but it's been over a day since you slept. And that's after having been carnapped by a member of Vengeance.)

Cassandra pauses her trot to look back up at you, her expression wary and her upper lip slowly curling to showcase tiny white fangs. She senses your resentment.

You force yourself to smile at her.

"Come on, Cassie," Kent coos. "Who's my pretty princess? Do your business, baby girl." His voice cracks with frustrated exhaustion. "Please."

You're in front of your house once more, standing before the very driveway at the end of which Nick has so often greeted you. But Nick isn't home right now. He might never come home again, unless Cassandra cooperates. Your emotions catch in your throat, sharp and choking, the reality of Nick's disappearance slicing through you like a molten knife.

You miss your brother.

Something wet licks the back of your hand. You look down to see Cassandra standing on her hind legs, meerkat-style, gazing up at your tear-streaked face as if she only now comprehends the depth of your sorrow.

You pat the top of her head. None of this is the dog's fault, after all, and it's not really her that you're upset with. Cassandra licks your hand once more, then falls back onto all four legs. She trots a few steps away, glancing back at you and Kent warily before letting out a "god, this is embarrassing!" huff through her nose. Her back arches.

There, in the middle of Nick's driveway, Cassandra leaves behind the greatest gift of all. She returns the usb shared by Caleb, within which is your best chance of finding out what Vengeance has done to your brother.

This dog is the best dog. The smartest girl. The most beautiful, benevolent pup to ever graced earth with her cutey-patootie presence. You take Cassandra's leash from Kent, gracing him with a wan smile as you detach the bag holder from the leash handle.

"Your dog," you tell him, handing over a small plastic baggie. "Your job."

***Disclaimer:** If your dog eats a flashdrive, please consult with a veterinarian immediately. This story is intended for humorous purposes only, written in an idealized world where no puppy ever has to deal with dangerous consequences for their actions.

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Workplace Conduct \(Ambrose\)](#)

[February 28](#)

Dear Wife/Husband/Spouse,

I begin this letter by stating, unequivocally, that I love you. Deeply and eternally, as was stated in my wedding vows. My affections have not changed nor will they in the future. You are and will always be my everything, and you know this.

However.

Since we have begun working together as colleges, your insistence upon "PDA" has been unprofessional and distracting. Yes, I love you. No, I am not embarrassed by our relationship. Yet I find it impossible to remain focused on my work, which is of no small import, due to your constant temptations. When I am in my office with the door closed during work hours, it is to fill out paperwork NOT a covert signal that I am available to, as you put it, "sneak in quickies." Your ability to successfully coax me notwithstanding, I cannot afford to continue taking multiple lunch breaks.

On similar note, I would also like to address your behavior when we are around others. Examples of conduct which I have found to be inappropriate include:

1) After your brother referred to me as a "hardass," you then pinching my buttock and saying "feels perfectly plush to me."

2) You revealing to Parker the nature of the birthday gift that I bought you. I would prefer that my subordinate not greet me in the morning by asking "how the vibes were last night" while suggestively wagging their eyebrows.

3) You smirking at Zarneki's banana and commenting "I've seen bigger" before staring at me.

4) Eating ice cream in the cafeteria. I realize that you are not intentionally acting provocative in this case, but the licking makes it difficult for me to concentrate.

To name only a few examples. A certain exuberance is to be expected given that we're newlyweds, but your behavior has surpassed the bounds of what I can tolerate. You may be winning your bet with Alavidze on how frequently you can make me blush, but your victory has come at the cost of my ability to work. I am not asking you to become someone else—your shocking impertinence is, after all, part of the reason that I fell in love with you. I would, however, appreciate if you could dial back the suggestive dialogue enough that we avoid getting written up for workplace harassment by Clarence Garfield.

In return for your consideration at our shared place of employment, I will make the following concessions:

1) Joining you for Wednesday dinners at your brother's instead of pretending that I have to work late.

2) Two "quickies" in my office a week, the time chosen at your discretion, and during which time I will finally agree to being called "Instructor."

3) I'll keep our fridge constantly stocked with your favorite flavor of ice cream so that you can eat it (and I can watch you) at your leisure.

I would like to reiterate that I love you, but that being in a state of near constant sexual frustration is not conducive to getting my work done. Save it for home, my love, and I promise that you won't be disappointed.

Yours,

Ambrose

[Mind Blind Saucy Side: Workplace Conduct \(Ambrosia\)](#)

[February 28](#)

Dear Wife/Husband/Spouse,

I begin this letter by stating, unequivocally, that I love you. Deeply and eternally, as was stated in my wedding vows. My affections have not changed nor will they in the future. You are and will always be my everything, and you know this.

However.

Since we have begun working together as colleges, your insistence upon "PDA" has been unprofessional and distracting. Yes, I love you. No, I am not embarrassed by our relationship. Yet I find it impossible to remain focused on my work, which is of no small import, due to your constant temptations. When I am in my office with the door closed during work hours, it is to fill out paperwork NOT a covert signal that I am available to, as you put it, "sneak in quickies." Your ability to successfully coax me notwithstanding, I cannot afford to continue taking multiple lunch breaks.

On similar note, I would also like to address your behavior when we are around others. Examples of conduct which I have found to be inappropriate include:

1) After your brother referred to me as a "hardass," you then pinching my buttock and saying "feels perfectly plush to me."

2) You revealing to Parker the nature of the birthday gift that I bought you. I would prefer that my subordinate not greet me in the morning by asking "how the vibes were last night" while suggestively waggling their eyebrows.

3) Your theft of my hair ties because my hair looks "sexier" down.

4) *Eating ice cream in the cafeteria. I realize that you are not intentionally acting provocative in this case, but the licking makes it difficult for me to concentrate.*

To name only a few examples. A certain exuberance is to be expected given that we're newlyweds, but your behavior has surpassed the bounds of what I can tolerate. You may be winning your bet with Alavidze on how frequently you can make me blush, but your victory has come at the cost of my ability to work. I am not asking you to become someone else—your shocking impertinence is, after all, part of the reason that I fell in love with you. I would, however, appreciate if you could dial back the suggestive dialogue enough that we avoid getting written up for workplace harassment by Clarence Garfield.

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I would like to reiterate that I love you, but that being in a state of near constant sexual frustration is not conducive to getting my work done. Save it for home, my love, and I promise that you won't be disappointed.

Yours,

Ambrosia

[Mind Blind - Now With A Cool Lobotomized Head](#)

[March 31](#)

The final cover art is here . . .

. . . And I'm pretty happy with it!



[MB Saucy Side: The Touch Ban](#)

[March 31](#)

At your announcement, Grayson freezes in the middle of making his sandwich (the closest that he ever comes to cooking). “No touching *at all*?” he asks, a plaintive note entering his voice.

“Until your birthday,” you confirm, steeling your heart against his puppy-dog eyes.

“But that’s almost an entire week,” Gray whimpers.

“It’s four days,” you correct. “And the surprise will be worth it, trust me.” You reach out to comfortingly stroke his stubbled cheek before quickly snapping your hand back—habits are hard to break, and the surprise will be ruined if Grayson overhears your thoughts.

“But I’ll miss you.”

"We'll still see each other every day, doofus," you say affectionately, almost second-guessing your decision because really, it should be illegal for a grown man to look so dang cute and pitiful. But no, the smile on Gray's face when he sees your surprise will make the three-day touch ban worth it. "I'll be staying in the guestroom."

Gray pouts as he cut the sandwich in half. He puts one half on a plate and slides it to you across the kitchen counter. "That's too far away."

You laugh, knowing that Gray wouldn't be protesting at all had you requested his distance for any other reason. The poor man probably feels more like he's being punished than anticipating his birthday present. There's a chance, however, that your plans may not work out. Gray was so disappointed the last time, and you don't want to put him through that again. You have a Plan B prepared just in case, although you're fairly confident that it won't be necessary.

Thus the three-day long touching ban begins.

Gray manages to behave himself for most of the first day. That evening, you and Sally are at the home goods store, picking out more baby blue accessories for Gray's gift. Your phone buzzes in your back pocket just as Sally shows you an absolutely adorable plush racoon that you *need* to buy, and you take it out to see a text from Grayson. You open the text . . . only to gasp and quickly turn off the screen.

Sally eyes you with thinly veiled amusement. "Care to share with the class?" she asks.

"Gray texted that he was thinking about me."

Sally's brows arch upwards. "Gray being sweet made you squeak like an electrocuted mouse? Gray's always sweet—he's boring like that."

You clear your throat. "The text was more . . . spicy than sweet. He sent a picture."

"A picture of himself *thinking*," Sally says, tapping the side of her nose knowingly. "Uh-huh. I see." Her nose crinkles. "I mean, I don't see, nor do I want to. Gray is basically my brother-in-law, and I don't need that visual."

"The visual was *excellent*."

Sally groans at your smirk and throws the racoon plushie into the shopping cart.

The second day, which falls on a Saturday, consists of Gray walking around your shared apartment shirtless. It's a hot day, he claims, blue eyes wide with faked innocence, even though the temperature outside is forty degrees Fahrenheit (or 4.444 degrees Celsius, as Grayson still insists on measuring it despite Fahrenheit's intrinsic superiority when discussing the weather).

"You're playing dirty," you accuse Gray as he bends over—slowly—to get an apple from the refrigerator fruit drawer. (You should've never bought him that pair of jeans. They fit way too well.)

Gray hides his smirk by biting into his apple. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Liar. You're trying to tempt me."

"Is it working?"

You deftly swipe his apple, the action too quick for him to get a good read on your thoughts. Your bite of the apple consumes his own; Gray swallows as your tongue darts out to catch a droplet of its juice.

"Better try harder," you say, sidestepping his question.

You toss Gray back the apple, which he easily catches. Your last visual before leaving the kitchen is of him staring dumbstruck down at your bitemark.

Gray takes your words to heart. On the third day, one day before his birthday, he tries harder. A *lot* harder. You wake up in the morning to breakfast (ordered from Sofi's, not made by Gray himself) being served to you in bed by a completely nude waiter who's careful to keep six inches distance between you (although more than six inches was necessary for *reasons*, you later joke to Sally).

"I love you for more than your body, you know," you tell Gray as he pours you a cup of orange juice.

"I know," Gray confidently replies. "But I have limited weapons in my arsenal, and you once told me that you wanted to bounce nickels off my pecs."

You tear your gaze away from Gray's chest and fall back into your pillows with a groan, covering your eyes with the back of your hand to avoid staring at the face (or, more accurately, nipples) of temptation.

"Begone, thot," you order him. "The surprise doesn't arrive until tomorrow."

Gray leaves your bedroom, but not before he places a neat bank roll of nickels on the breakfast platter next to your juice glass.

When you implemented the touching ban, you didn't expect that Gray would turn it into a battle of willpower. Your boyfriend isn't usually the competitive sort. He's the one who always turns a blind eye when Nick cheats at Uno during game night, and he once went on two-hour runs every morning for an office step count challenge only to decide not to turn in his track sheet because he thought that Stacy in Accounting deserved the grand prize more. He plays healer classes in tabletop games.

In the past, when you two have had arguments, Grayson has been more than willing to give you space. But this is different. Gray is intent on breaking down your barriers with the glee of a child rummaging through his parents' closet the day before Christmas. If you seriously asked him to stop, you have no doubt that he would.

But then he wouldn't currently be cleaning the condo.

Having failed to appeal to your carnal urges, Gray has now taken it upon himself to do your assigned half of the household chores—it almost feels as if your birthday has come early rather than it being the day before his.

You let out an approving moan as Grayson begins vacuuming the living room rug.

“Really?” Gray asks with a surprised laugh. “This is doing more for you than the nickels?”

“I felt my willpower weakening with each dish you washed.”

“Huh,” he says. “Could’ve saved twenty dollars.”

“You had the bank exchange a twenty-dollar bill into nickels?”

He shrugs. “I miss hugging you.”

That simple confession, more than anything else, is almost enough to make you capitulate. The surprise was finalized in a phone call yesterday—Gray won’t love his present any less just because he knows what it is before his birthday.

Gray senses your shaken resolve like a shark after blood. He turns off the vacuum, taking several steps towards you until he’s only a few feet away.

“I miss holding you at night,” he says. “I miss touching you. Tasting you. I miss waking up before you in the morning, when you’re sprawled across the bed like a drunk starfish, your dreams nonsensical snippets of what we did last night.”

“I don’t sleep like a drunk starfish,” you argue, but you can’t take your eyes off of his lips. Usually when Gray and you banter, this would be the point where he steals a kiss.

“You steal the entire bed,” Gray says, his lips curving in a smile when he notices the direction of your gaze. “And when I can no longer roll over, you just sleep atop of me.” He takes another step towards you. Close enough to touch, if you were only to reach out, but still too far to hear your thoughts.

“And I love it,” he continues. “All of it. Even the snoring.”

Drunk starfish you might be, but you’re not about to stay here and be accused of snoring by a man who sounds like a bulldozer whenever he sleeps on his back. You turn your back and leave the room, smiling secretly to yourself as Grayson calls out “Sweetheart, I was just joking!”

The day of his birthday, Gray breaks down and cries.

“This is the best surprise ever,” he chokes out. “*You’re* the best ever.”

He attempts to kiss your cheek, only for the labrador puppy in his arms to intercept the action. You squeal as Acorn (named by Gray) forces her head between you and Grayson’s lips. She licks your

cheeks, leaving behind streaks of drool.

Nick pauses cutting Grayson's birthday cake (baked by your brother, of course) to laugh at your disappointed pout (it's been three days since you last kissed your boyfriend, so he really should be more empathetic).

"Puppies are the same as babies, you know," Nick points out. "It'll be a while before you two can get any alone time."

[MB Short Story: I Told You So](#)

[Yesterday](#)

"For the last time, it is NOT going to rain." Glitch shoves her phone into Kent's face. "See that forecast? Zero percent chance of rain. Meteorologists sacrificed their lives getting that data."

"Doubtful," Kent states.

Glitch rolls her eyes. "Well, they at least sacrificed sleep. My point remains unchanged: It. Is. Not. Going. To. Rain." She pulls aside the curtain on the living room window and gestures dramatically to the clear, sunny sky beyond. "See? Not a raincloud in sight."

"Antigone is biting her tail," Kent says simply.

"So?"

"It's going to rain."

Glitch throws both her hands up in the air. "God, why must you torment me with this idiot of a best friend?" she demands to the heavens. "Kent, the sun is shining. Not a single cloud has dared to cross that glorious expanse of baby blue above us. The heavens are clear."

"It's going to rain," Kent repeats.

"A bet, then," Glitch proposes. "We go to meet El and Sally at the beach, like we already agreed to do. If it doesn't rain, you have to buy everyone lunch. And if by some malicious miracle you're actually right and it *does* rains . . . well, you'll get to say 'I told you so,' and I promise not to argue."

Kent takes a moment to contemplate the bargain. "Deal."

Three hours later, Chicago has fallen to the dark side. The once pristine blue firmament is now shrouded in ominous black, thunder roaring without ceasefire as it rolls from cloud to cloud. The heavens have sundered, torrential rain pounding down upon the unsuspecting beachgoers.

Unsuspecting, that is, except for Kent Zarneki, who calmly takes a fold-up umbrella out of his tote while his friends shriek and flee to seek shelter beneath a bagel shop's entry way overhang.

"Black magic," Glitch accuses, jabbing her index finger into Kent's chest. "That's the only way you could've known that this was going to happen."

"Kent predicted this?" Sally asks, squeezing the water out of her curls. "But the weather report didn't say anything about rain."

"Ah," Ellery says, as if Kent being a witch makes all the sense in the world. "Annie was biting her tail this morning?"

Kent nods.

"Stop acting like that makes sense!" Glitch squawks. "It doesn't! The weather report is science! What's next, we watch a ground hog to see if spring has arrived? Consult the migration patterns of pigeons for advice on our love lives?"

"I mean, animals can often sense—" Sally breaks off as Glitch glares at her ferociously. "You're right," she corrects, suppressing a chuckle. "It's definitely witchcraft."

"And the worst part of all is that he won the bet!" Glitch groans. "Y'all don't know how insufferable he becomes when he gets to say 'I told you so.'"

Kent smiles slightly and Glitch points an accusatory finger at him. "See? See that smirk right there. It's because *he won't say it right away*. I have to wait for weeks, once even months, waiting for the bomb to drop. And then when he FINALLY says it, he does in public, at the perfect time to make me look like a complete and utter moron. It's a game to him! A sadistic, wicked game!" She whirls to face Ellery. "You have terrible taste in men, sugar."

"I don't understand what the big deal is," Sally says as Ellery and Kent exchange smitten glances.

"Oh, you will," Glitch warns darkly as storm clouds roil overhead. "You will."

Three weeks later, the words "I told you so" have yet to cross Kent Zarneki's lips. Glitch pleads with her friend, but he only shrugs and says "I forgot about that."

Glitch *knows* this is a lie. Kent Zarneki has the memory of a vengeful elephant.

(Ellery's naïve insistence that, no, Kent really just forgot about the bet falls upon deaf ears. Of course, Ellery wants to defend their boyfriend. But Glitch knows that Kent remembers, and that he's simply

biding his time like a circling shark.)

A year passes. Then two years.

Ellery and Kent are married. Glitch forgets about the bet, although sometimes wonders about the contemplative, smug smile that occasionally curves Kent's lips.

Another two years go by.

Then half a decade. Talia (as she now primarily goes by) is in her early thirties, newly single after an impulsive marriage to a Vegas stage magician—their union, which lasted two month, had been brief and ill-advised but extremely fun while it lasted.

"I know that you said it wouldn't last, and you were right," Talia says as she informs Kent about her impending divorce.

Kent simply smiles. "You can stay with us until you find a new place," he says. "You're family."

"Thanks," Talia replies. "I'll try not to be an inconvenience since you two are already dealing with the new baby." She forces a smile and adds in an upbeat tone, "At least I can now check 'having a wedding ceremony officiated by Elvis' off the bucket list."

Three years and two divorces later (her exes, Talia insists, made terrible spouses but remain wonderful friends), Talia now goes by "Auntie Talia" to Kent and Ellery's child. At thirty-five, she still has time to find a lasting relationship but . . . well, Talia's decided to view her love life as series of grand adventures even if the goal of happily-ever-after currently remains elusive.

"You sure that you don't mind me tagging along on your vacation?" she asks Ellery, who scoffs at the question.

"Don't worry, Kent and I go on plenty of romantic getaways alone together because you stay over to watch the kiddo and the dogs," Ellery says as she purchases four tickets (three adults, one child) at the booth. She hands one to Talia. "This is a family trip, and you're family."

A small, sticky hand slides into Talia's, and her godchild begins dragging her excitedly towards the amusement park entrance. Talia's throat tightens. "Family, huh? I guess that we really are."

She glances away, feeling inexplicably shy, only for her gaze to land on Kent. His lips curve in a hauntingly familiar, smug smile, and all of a sudden Talia recalls a stormy day in Chicago that happened over a decade ago.

"I told you so," Kent says.

Talia smiles back, knowing that she's not allowed to argue.

[Yesterday](#)

The knight's muscles rippled in the moonlight as he bent down to bathe himself in the silvery waters of Lake Silver. The princess stop breathing as silvery droplets of moisture trickled down his bared, rock-hewn abs. What is wrong with me? She thought, too purely innocent to understand the fevered heat which was rising within her loins. Sir Nikolai is my sworn knight protector. It is indecent to watch his nude form. . . I should leave.

The bush rustled as the princess began to crawl away. 'WHO'S THERE?' Sir Nikolai shouted, drawing his sword. 'SHOW YOURSELF AT ONCE!'

He leapt from the silvery waters and swung his sword fiercely at the bush where—until a mere moment ago—the princess had been watching from within.

'Do not strike me, Sir Nick!' The princess ejaculated. 'It is only I!'

'Princess Fania?' Sir Nikolai dropped his sword on the ground and immediately fell to one knee in a knightly kneel. 'What are you doing here. Were you watching me bathe?'

The princess blushed. 'O-o-of c-c-course n-n-not,' she stuttered.

'Good,' Sir Nikolai replied sadly, a tear forming in his loving eyes. 'We cannot be together as man and woman, my princess, much as I might secretly yearn for your tender, maidenly touch. But you are my lady, and I am your sworn knight protector!'

" . . . And then they kiss," Glitch finished. "After another three or so chapters yearning, of course. Maybe he saves her from a dragon named Rosebud?"

Stephanie Valero gasped and slammed her notebook shut, aghast at discovering that her coworker had been sneakily reading her writing—her very, very *private* writing—over her shoulder.

"Sorry," Glitch said, sounding genuinely contrite as color flooded Stephanie's cheeks. "You probably came to this courtyard because it's usually empty, right? I do the same thing."

"I need to go," Stephanie mumbled.

"In my admittedly thin defense, I *did* call out to you multiple times. You were so absorbed with whatever you were writing that I had no choice but to sneak a peek." Glitch splayed their palms in the air.

"Curiosity is my kryptonite."

Journal clutched to her chest, Stephanie glared at Glitch with all the force that she could muster (which wasn't much, having never been very strong willed). "You made fun of me," she said in a small voice.

"I did not!" Glitch contradicted. "Forbidden love blossoming between lady liege and knight dates back to Arthurian legend. Why would I make fun of you for reinterpreting a classic trope?"

Stephanie searched for any bite in Glitch's words but could find no sign of derision. "I know that I'm not the best writer," she admitted, "and this is the first draft, so—"

"In that case, do you need a beta reader?" Glitch asked, their brown eyes sparkling with eagerness. "I have free time now that I'm no longer working as a T.A."

Stephanie's eyes narrowed. "Why would you want to read my story?"

"It's true: you're not a great writer."

Despite having uttered the words herself, Stephanie still flinched at having Glitch's glib verification.

"What you are, however, is an *indulgent* writer," Glitch continued, "and I'd much rather participant in indulgence than greatness." They shrugged. "Also, I've been bored out of my mind these recent free periods, and playing editor will be fun."

Stephanie chewed the inside of her lip. "My work isn't meant to be read by anyone but me. It's . . . personal." Especially the earlier chapters, where she'd been a bit too heavy-handed when it came to metaphors about jousting poles.

"Fine. I really didn't want to resort to this, but you leave me no choice." Glitch leaned in so close to Stephanie that their noses almost touched, lowering their voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Ellery Wiseman brings me a freshly baked blueberry muffin every morning on account of having lost a bet."

"I don't see how—"

"Who do you think makes these muffins? I'll give you a hint: it's not EI."

Stephanie's heart, ever foolish, gave a tiny flutter. "You mean . . ."

"That's right," Glitch confirmed. "*He* makes them to pay off his sibling's debt, and *he'll* continue baking them until July. Much as I savor my breakfasts, I might be induced to share with, say, a friend."

"A friend?"

"A friend who lets me read her writing." Upon seeing Stephanie's continued hesitation, Glitch expression shifted from mischievous to solemn. "I won't make fun of you, Steph—I really do think that it's awesome that you have a creative outlet. Plus, I'd love to have someone read my stuff as well, because Kent is useless when it comes to critiquing poetry. This could be a mutual critique session. But if you're still uncomfortable sharing, I won't press."

Stephanie took a deep breath before nodding with resolve. "Let's do it." She hesitated. "And the muffins?"

"Are yours," Glitch confirmed.

They shook hands to seal the bargain, Stephanie's fingers cold and trembling in Glitch's firm grip. She had a niggling suspicion that she might have just joined a writing club with the devil . . . but surely the muffins would be worth it.

Princess Fania thrashed beneath the dragon's gleaming black claws, which pinned her to ground like a rabbit ensnared within a trap.

'Release me, foul beast!' she cried out. 'I will never marry you!'

'Marriage?' The Black Dragon cackled, puffs of smoke curling menacingly from its scaly nostrils. 'I have no interest in marrying you, my pretty little sweetmeat.'

'Then why?' Princess Fania demanded. 'Why capture me on the day of my wedding, if not to wed me yourself and thus lay claim to my father's throne?'

The Black Dragon licked his foul snout with a slit tongue. 'Because virgins are delicious,' he hissed. 'Especially virgin princesses.'

Oh! How Fania wished now that she had not fled from Sir Nikolai that fateful night! Because she had left that night with maidenly virtue intact, she was now doomed to die. She would never see her knight protector again, never witness Sir Nikolai's tender smile or admire the way that the sun glistened off his pink hair as if reflecting the hue of her heart.

'Unhand the princess, Ambrogisinth!' A deep male voice ejaculated just as Fania's eyes drifted closed in defeat. 'I have come to rescue my lady!'

"Steph. We talked about this." Glitch set down the newest chapter of *Night of The Knight* on the courtyard's picnic table, staring at Stephanie with censure that bordered on parental.

Stephanie swallowed the last bite of her blueberry muffin. "It means to say something vehemently."

"And is that the *first* definition in the dictionary?"

"It's used that way in *Anne of Green Gables*," Stephanie said defensively. "And in *Sherlock Holmes*."

"As much I appreciate your taste in classic literature, those sentences are memes nowadays," Glitch said. "No more ejaculations in this story, I'm begging you. Not unless they're the fun kind."

His turgid lance was a massive weapon of steel, the likes of which the princess had never before seen. 'Neigh, Sir Nick!' the princess cried out. 'I cannot handle such a mighty weapon!'

"She's not a horse, Steph," Glitch said. "If you're using the old English, then you have to spell things right. Although . . ." Glitch scratched their chin contemplatively. "Have you considered turning Princess Fania into a centaur?"

Stephanie glared at them. "Just keep reading and let me know what you think."

'You must hold it more securely, your highness!' Sir Nikolai instructed, moving Princess Fania's small, delicate hands so that they gripped further up the shaft. 'Yes, just like that!'

'You truly think that I can win this match?' Princess Fania asked.

Sir Nikolai's hand tilted up her chin so that she gazed directly into his sparkling ruby eyes. 'You defeat me every day, my lady, and I am the greatest knight in the kingdom. Continue training, and victory will be yours come the jousting tournament.'

"Hold up," Glitch interjected. "This isn't a sex scene?"

Stephanie gasped. "Of course not! Sir Nikolai is training Princess Fania so that she can enter the jousting tournament and win her father's approval to become the crown princess."

"Huh. I thought that they were finally going at it."

The furious growl that emerged from Stephanie's throat rivaled that of the Black Dragon Ambrogisinth. "They can't *make love* yet," she scolded. "Sir Nikolai hasn't even realized that he's in love with the princess."

"I thought that he confessed that back in chapter one hundred and seventeen."

"He only admitted to secretly yearning for her touch. That's different."

"So, Sir Nikolai admits to being in lust but not to being love."

"Exactly!"

Glitch gave a sharp salute, signaling that they now comprehended Sir Nikolai's internal character development. "Is this training scene meant to come across as so sexual, though?" they asked. "Because I REALLY didn't think that she was handling an actual weapon."

Stephanie nodded with the seriousness of a scholar lecturing on feminist modalities of metaphysical philosophic doctrine in postmodern Europe. "Sexually charged training scenes are a must in indulgent fiction."

The sun-warmed grass embraced Princess Fania like the finest of silk sheets as Sir Nikolai pushed her gently onto the ground. Breathless, she shyly watched as her beloved knight protector, bared of his customary golden armor, braced himself above her.

'Be gentle with me, Sir Nick,' Princess Fania pleaded. 'For I know naught of the ways of love.'

"Just to confirm, this is an actual sex scene, right?"

"Yes."

Sir Nikolai pressed his heated lips to her petal soft ones. 'Fear not, my love,' he declared. 'As a paladin, I too have never known the embrace of another.'

"Wait. Hold up." Glitch could barely get their words out over their sputtering laughter. "Sir Nick is a—" Their last word was lost to a coughing fit of giggles. "A *virgin*?"

"Is that a problem?" Stephanie demanded, an angry line forming between her brows.

"Being a virgin? Of course not. But *Nick* is the farthest thing from . . ." Glitch cut themselves off at Stephanie's darkening frown. "Right, sorry. I meant *Sir Nikolai*, who bears no resemblance to actual persons, living or dead."

"Sir Nikolai is a paladin," Stephanie said, blithely ignoring Glitch's implication. "He swore an oath of chastity to the gods, which only the intensity of his love for Fania now compels him to break."

"Gotcha," Glitch said, coughing to disguise their persistent giggles. "Sorry, was just asking to clarify. So, are the gods gonna smote him for breaking his vow? Because that would be fun for the next story arch."

"Of course not," Stephanie said, rolling her eyes. "The gods never demanded the vow of chastity—it was created by the temple so that their holy paladins didn't leave the order by going off to have families."

"That . . . actually makes a lot of sense."

"Well, you're the one who insisted that I flush out the world's lore," Stephanie told Glitch generously. "It paid off." She smirked, which wasn't an expression which the old Stephanie Valero had ever before had the confidence to pull off. Glitch was a bad (or good?) influence.

"Keep reading," she instructed her editor. "I think you'll finally approve of my word choice."