

1

Jack Harigand awoke from his alcohol induced stupor to find a glass of water and a cardboard box on his desk.

“Drink me ☺” read a yellow sticky note stuck on the glass. “Open me ☺”, read a second sticky attached to the box. Harigand scowled and tore open the box, cutting the tape with his long unkempt fingernails.

The box contained a headset. But not a cheap headset like a tech support farm would have. No, the headset was the type that covered one’s entire head – it might be more fair to call the headset in the box Harigand opened a helmet moreso than anything. In the box were wires as well, saying “plug me in ☺” and “connect me to the Medium ☺.” His head aching, Harigand finally reached towards the glass of water –

And poured it all over the electronic gizmo that had manifested itself in his office. With a satisfied sigh and a grueling headache, Harigand dry-heaved, then went back to sleep.

2

Jack Harigand awoke from his alcohol induced stupor to find a glass of water and a cardboard box on his desk.

“Seriously, drink me ☺.” read a yellow sticky note stuck upon the glass, which now had a ecologically friendly paper straw in it. “Open me ☺”, read a second sticky attached to the box. Harigand opened the box, to find another large helmet. He reached for the glass of water once more but was unable to pour its contents upon the electronic helmet. The base of the glass was superglued to Harigand’s twelve-thousand-dollar mahogany desk.

“Ughhhhh.”, Harigand groaned, inadvertently knocking several files and a few lottery tickets off his desk. A sudden headache wracked his brain. Capitulating, he took a small sip of water from the paper straw in the glass. “Fine.”, he muttered, and began fiddling with the helmet in the box.

Harigand didn’t know what the helmet was, but he could wager a guess. He had glanced through the windows of enough apartments to have an idea. A toy, essentially. A toy, but a toy so popular he’d see kids flailing around with it on in the middle of a school day. And from the cover of the box, this toy that had found its way to his office past several padlocks while he slumbered was apparently called the “Medium.”

Harigand eyed the toy with suspicion. Perhaps the toy was called the “Medium” because it certainly wasn’t rare or well-done. The thing looked and felt like an overwrought bicycle helmet. It was cumbersome and unwieldy, not to Harigand’s liking. He practically asphyxiated himself on all the wires and dongles he had to plug in. reaction to its multiple sources of power. But slowly and surely, a faint red light began to glow on the front end of the Medium. Briefly, Harigand contemplated walking over to the kitchen and pouring another, non-superglued-to-his-desk glass

of water upon the helmet. But that would have required getting up, and the rhythmic pains pulsing through Harigand's head would have none of that.

And so, still seated in his leather chair, and having a feeling he'd regret it, Harigand put on the helmet.

3

Harigand regretted putting on the helmet. At first, he found the total darkness that engulfed him soothing. Without visual stimuli and light to agitate his senses, his pounding headache became more like a light pitter patter of agita. But that total darkness lasted for only two to three seconds.

"WWWWWWWWWWREEEEEEEEEEN!", the helmet atop his head whirred, fans spinning and magnetic discs shifting as the soothing darkness dissipated, replaced by bright prismatic colors. The resplendence would have been inspiring had the sudden flashes and brightness not also inspired Harigand's stomach to dry heave once again.

The epileptic display stopped, as two scarlet colored words forced themselves into Harigand's central vision.

The Medium

"Just like Warioland.", muttered Harigand. But even a Luddite like him could tell it wasn't like Warioland. Unlike the Virtual Boy, The Medium had no controller, no gloves. Just a helmet. A helmet was enough. The back of Harigand's fingers began to itch. He looked down where his hands should be. "P-paws?", he stammered.

And indeed, Harigand had paws. Cartoonish paws with opposable thumbs, but paws none the less. They looked like paws, and a bit more worryingly, they felt like paws. As if bidden by his observation, light blue text wrapped itself beneath the scarlet title screen.

[Selected Avatar: Default Dog](#)

[Selected Outfit: Noire Nonce](#)

The words "The Medium" faded away, and a mirror took its place. "...What?", Harigand blurted, as he saw his "reflection." He looked like a Chinese Knockoff of Scruff McGruff. A brown anthropomorphic hound-dog, wearing a trenchcoat, slacks, and an exceedingly useless trilby hat. "What?", Harigand repeated, only to find his "what" replaced by a stock sound of a greyhound barking.

“Oi, bad dog!”, a vaguely British sounding voice rang out. “It’s rude to bark at your master!”

“Master?”, Harigand asked, his words coming out once again as a bark. “Yes, Master.”, the disembodied voice replied. “I just said that bruv, there’s no need to repeat it. Oh, and...”

The prismatic title screen shifted. Air rushed through Harigand’s (simulated) fur. Suddenly, he found himself surrounded by the noise of honking horns and construction. Cartoonish skyscrapers and extra large fire hydrants erupted from the ground. Then, perhaps due to his hangover, the world started spinning. When it stopped, Harigand found himself sitting at a stool on a rooftop bar, surrounded by a cavalcade of human-like animals. Most of them were dogs that looked just like him, minus the trilby and jacket. But there was a squid person wearing a bowler, a giraffe with human hands, and a wolf wearing a leather jacket (and nothing else). Harigand locked eyes with the wolf.

The anthropomorphic wolf wearing a leather jacket (and nothing else) stepped forward and extended a paw. “Welcome to Chew York, mate!” Harigand looked around again at the shaded skyscrapers and the animal avatars, then back to the wolf.

“How do I log out?”

4

“You can’t log out.”, replied the wolf. “Not until you pass the test.”

Harigand scowled and reached out his paws to pull the Medium off his head. The paws grasped nothing but air.

“Nice try, but this isn’t VRchat.”, the wolf chimed. “You’re wearing a full dive headset mate. Your body is currently vegging out in that chair, while your cerebellum thinks that... *this-*” the wolf gestured, waving his paws at the rooftop bar and everything “- is all real.” The wolf paused, as if processing what he had just said. “Let me buy you a drink.”

“Oi, bartender!”, the wolf called out, holding up a cartoony sack with \$\$\$ on it. “An Appletini for myself, and an Old Fashioned for my mate!”

Harigand narrowed his eyes at the word “mate”, but let it go.

The bartender (the giraffe with human hands) took the sack of cash from the wolf’s paws, and began making the drinks. Unlike the sack of money, the drinks didn’t manifest out of thin air. The Appletini was made using (exaggerated and shaded) bottles of vodka (named Paw-ka), brandy (named Randy), and schnapps (named... schnapps). The Old Fashioned was made using a bottle of Johnny *Barker* Blue Label.

“Furries and their puns, right?”, the wolf in the leather Harigandet said with a grin. “Still, you’ll find few subcultures with quite as much disposable income. Which brings me to the test...”

Harigand ignored the wolf, and took a sip of his old fashioned. It certainly *tasted* like whiskey.

“Bruv! Bruv!”, the wolf cried out. “The test!”

Harigand shook his fur covered face and looked at the wolf. “What about the test?”, he meant to ask, but his words just came out as a bark again.

“The test is why you were so generously given a copy of the Medium.”, the wolf responded. “I know a fella who represents a guy who knows the roommate of someone who is ultimately speaking the boss. They need someone who is good at scrapping up dirt, and when I looked around you were the dirtiest detective I could find.”

Harigand scowled, and found himself literally growling at the wolf. “Whoa, whoa, relax bruv!”, the wolf exclaimed. “Dirty is good! Especially for the test!”

So what’s the test, Harigand thought, but didn’t say, out of fear of having his words warped into a bark again.

“So what’s the test?”, the wolf repeated, seeming to read Harigand’s mind. “Simple enough. Infidelity case, stuff you’re used to.” The wolf slid over a picture of an anthropomorphic, and very, very female panther wearing a red dress. “This is the mark. Their boyfriend suspects an affair. Find them and see what’s up.”

“Is this a joke?”, Harigand asked, and was surprised to find his voice remained unmodified. The wolf shook his head and lapped at his appletini with an elongated tongue.

“Not a joke.”, the wolf muttered. “Do this right, and you’ll find what I gave Mr. Bartender here when you log out.”

“So you want me to find and stalk a large breasted cat?”

“Yeah, basically.”, the wolf said.

“But this is a *video game*.”, Harigand replied. “I can’t tail someone who can just disappear into thin air when mom calls them downstairs for dinner.”

“Heh.”, the wolf laughed. “No, you can, and you will, if you ever want to log out of here.” He pushed the photo of the panther-woman into Harigand’s paw. To Harigand’s surprise, the photo disappeared, and a small version of the photo settled itself in his peripheral vision.

“I’ve placed the photo in your inventory.”, the wolf explained. “Just pinch that little icon if you want to see it again. You can put other items in your inventory too, if you don’t feel like slugging around a wardrobe.”

Harigand slumped his shoulders. “Where should I start?”, he asked. “That’s your prerogative!”, the wolf replied. “You *are* a detective, aren’t you bruv?”

“And what if I can’t find this cat-girl?” “I’ll buy you a pop.”, the wolf replied sarcastically. “Growth mindset, Harigandie, not a fixed mindset. Use those skills that landed you that mancave of an office. Oh, and finish your drink.”

“I’m hung over.”, Harigand replied. “Well...”, the wolf said with an obnoxious grin. “Hair of the dog, right?” The wolf downed the rest of his Appletini, and spread his arms. “C’mon, you’re on a platform used by hundreds of millions of people, how hard can it be? Oh, and no talking until you complete your task!”

And then, like disappearing vertical bars in a powerpoint presentation, the wolf was gone, leaving Harigand alone at the bar.

Harigand finished his drink. And to his surprise, he did feel a little better. A pumped stomach and a trip to the ER had taught him all he needed to know about day-drinking, but it was night in the world of the Medium.

Harigand put the logistics of virtual alcoholism behind him, and got to work. From the rooftop, the city of Chew York looked to be the size of Manhattan. A Mammoth sized Metropolis. Finding the panther woman would not be easy. He decided to start right where he was, at the rooftop bar. There were about fifty animal-people there. Harigand saw a cheetah-woman and a lion-girl, but no panther. He sighed and went back to the bar the old standby.

With skeptical paws, Harigand pinched the photo file in his peripheral vision, and manifested the picture of the panther woman. “Bark.”, Harigand said, extending the photo to the bartender. “Do you know this woman?” is what Harigand *meant* to say, but the wolf wasn’t kidding when he said “No talking.”

Fortunately, the bartender got the gist of it anyways. Unfortunately, the bartender just gazed at the photo Harigand handed him, and then slowly shook his head. Harigand curled his paw into a fist. The rooftop bar was a bust.

With no other option, Harigand made his way down the building, all thirteen flights of stairs. Half of him reasoned that he might run into the panther woman on the way down, and the other half of him reasoned that he was having an incredibly stupid dream.

5

Jack Harigand was not having an incredibly stupid dream. Sure, the wolf might have referred to Chew York and its anthropomorphic inhabitants as the byproduct of a dream, but what Jack Harigand was experiencing was very much real. In an artificial way.

The first thing Harigand did upon getting to the bottom of the building was to walk out onto the streets, and head towards the largest thing that caught his eye. That might have been the reasoning of an idiot, but when one’s goal was to find someone out of a large crowd, it helped to be an idiot.

What it came down to was population density. The more, uh, “people” in a venue, the more likely it was there was someone who knew the buxom panther woman Harigand had been assigned to find. The first place that caught Harigand’s eye was a giant stadium. The stadium caught Harigand’s eye firstly because of its size, but secondly because it was floating, unsupported, half a mile in the air.

Harigand’s stomach sank. He had not seen that stadium up on the rooftop bar. By all accounts, the stadium had appeared straight out of thin air. Jack’s tail curled between his legs. Partly from the realization that he *had* a tail, but mostly out of the realization he was indeed in a world that operated on video game logic.

“ATTENTION CHEWWWWW YORK!”, a loud voice from the sky boomed. “ARE YOU READY FOR TODAY’S DAILY BARK BUCKS GIVEAWAY?!”

Harigand’s eyes squinted, as the stadium in the sky shone neon lights at the streets below.

“YEEEEEEEEEEEEAAHHHHHHH!”, a crowd of people on the streets replied, screaming up to the sky.

“WELL... COME AND GEEEEEEET IT!”, the voice from the sky declared. The sky turned to dusk in an instant. Dozens and dozens of green comets began raining down from above, one crashing right in front of Harigand’s furry feet.

“FIND THREE KEYS...”, the voice from the sky declared, “AND THE LOCATION OF THE PRIZE WILL BE YOURS!”

Hesitantly, Harigand reached towards the center of the comet’s impact zone. He wrapped his paws around a brightly colored green rock. “Key One of Three Found.”, a robotic voice chimed into his ears. “Find Two More To Get The Prize!” Like he had done with the photo, Harigand tried to pinch the key into his peripheral vision. “Error.”, the robotic voice chimed. “Prize Keys Cannot Be Added Into Your Inventory.” Harigand raised an eyebrow, but not for long. “Yoink!”, a small rat person cried, snatching the green rock out of Harigand’s paws. “Mine now!”

Harigand gave chase. The rat creature weaved in and out of the crowd on the sidewalk. Harigand just plowed right through them. “Ow!”, one person wearing a default dog avatar cried. “What’s your problem, bleephole!”, exclaimed another. Harigand rolled his eyes. This was all just a video game, there was no way anyone could actually be- “Ugh!”, Harigand cried, as he was smacked in the face by a small rock. “Stop chasing me, creep!”, the rat man called out, then ducked into a nearby alley.

By the time Harigand turned into the alley, the rat man was gone. The only things left in the alley was a dumpster, and a suspiciously tilted half-opened manhole. Harigand scrunched up his nose, and quietly climbed into the dumpster. He crouched down and remained still as he could. One minute passed, then two, then three. Just when Harigand had been in the smelly trash heap for four minutes, the half opened manhole opened all the way. “GRAAAAAAAAH!”, Jack Harigand screamed, leaping out of the dumpster to tackle the thieving rat.

“Ow! I give, I give!” the rat cried. “Here, take my key!” The rat handed back the green gem, along with a blue gem. “I didn’t want those stinking Bark Bucks anyways.” Harigand raised an eyebrow. There was something off about the rat. Something about his cartoonish voice seemed perfunctory, or rehearsed. “Ow! I give, I give!” cried the same voice as the rat, but at the opposite end of the alley. “Here, take my key!” “I didn’t want those stinking Bark Bucks anyways.” Harigand turned to find another person wearing the default dog costume being handed a green and blue gem by the spitting image of the rat person that had handed Harigand *his* gems. “Ow! I give, I give!”, cried a third rat. “Here, take my key!” “I didn’t want those stinking Bark Bucks anyways.”

And then, Harigand realized – the rat was an NPC. A non-player character. A scripted automaton. He took the two gems in his hand. Perhaps if he found the third--

“AND WE HAVE A WINNER!”, boomed the voice from the sky, as the green and blue gems in Harigand’s paws disappeared. “CONGRATULATIONS TO SOCCERMYBALLS69 FOR FINDING ALL THREE KEYS!”

Harigand sighed. He didn’t particularly care about winning a bunch of fake money, but the location of the treasure would probably attract a lot of others to it. Harigand turned to the default dog that had tackled the second copy of the rat person. “Have you seen this woman?”, is what he meant to say, but all that came out of Harigand’s snout was “Bark.”

“Wooaah dude.”, the default dog in front him said. “Are you, like, RPing right now?” “Bark.”, replied Harigand.

“You totally are!”, Harigand’s fellow loser exclaimed, then tugged a bit on his neck. “Look man, I’m gonna level with you – I’m not really a furry. I just play Chew York because it came with the headset.” Harigand groaned, then pulled out the photo of the panther woman. “Bark.”, he barked.

“What, do you want me to like, be this woman for you man? I told you I’m not a-” Harigand facepalmed, then shook his head and put his thumb down. “Oh, you don’t want me to pretend to be a woman. So what do you want from me, man?”

“Bark.”, Harigand replied.

6

The interrogation of the default dog in the alley didn’t go anywhere. Partly because all Harigand could say to him was “bark”, but mostly because the default dog was convinced Harigand was hitting on him. “I told you dipshit, I’m not interested!”, the man in the default dog avatar cried. “If you want that sort of game, go to the Golden Kennel!”

“Bark.”, Harigand barked. The Golden Kennel. It wasn’t much of a lead, but it was something. It seemed seedy, but the size of the panther woman’s busom seemed seedy.

Unfortunately, Harigand had no idea how to get to the Golden Kennel. Chew York was, in terms of size, a scale replica of Manhattan. Even if it wasn't a sprawling metropolis, he had no idea how to –

Harigand paused, then tilted his head to the sky. He noticed a bunch of giant billboards plastered to the side of the floating colosseum that had issued out the Bark Bucks challenge earlier. Well, billboards was one way of looking at them. From the large X in their corners, they more resembled giant pop-up advertisements.

“Cash 4 Bark Bucks!”, read one of the billboards. “Invest in Barkcoin!”, read another. Out of (human) instinct, Harigand raised one of his paws over the X of the pop-up that was half a mile above him. To his surprise, doing so actually closed the pop-up.

“Create Your Own Avatar Deal – Only 4,000 Bark Bucks!” read one pop-up. This pop-up showcased a buxom looking mouse girl. Harigand paused, then placed his paw over the “more information” tab.

The entire city scape faded away from him, replaced by a mirror, a wardrobe, and an infinite black void. And a menu.

Selected Avatar: Default Dog
← Default Dog →

The menu looked like it did before. But this time there were two arrows beneath the menu, one pointing to the left, one pointing to the right. Harigand placed a paw over the arrow to the right. And then he shrunk. From his three foot tall vantage point, Harigand could see the menu now read:

Selected Avatar: Miniscule Mouse
← Miniscule Mouse →

“No.”, is what Harigand meant to say. “Squeak.” is what Harigand expected to say. “Bark.” Is what Harigand actually said. The wolf had apparently not accounted for Harigand changing his avatar. Harigand leapt up a bit, and hit the arrow to his right again. This time Harigand grew both vertically and horizontally.

Selected Avatar: Pompous Panda
← Pompous Panda →

“Bark.”, Harigand barked, not wanting that either. He cycled through forty five animal avatars ranging from Bashful Bunny to Hydrophobic Hippo before finally arriving at the option he wanted.

Selected Avatar: Pretty Panther

“Bark.”, Harigand barked, and by “Bark” he meant “yes.” He felt his gut shrink, his loins shift, and his chest expand, until he was almost the spitting image of the panther woman in the photo. Now all he needed was the dress. He navigated his paws to the outfit menu below the avatar menu.

Selected Outfit: Noire Nonce

X Noire Nonce X

To Jack Harigand’s chagrin, the outfit menu could not be changed. He(well arguably she) was stuck with Noire Nonce at the moment, and that was that. Suddenly, the black void shattered, and Jack was back atop the roof’s bar.

“What the bloody hell are you doing mate?!”, the wolf cried out to him, holding his head in his paws. “I hired you to be Claric Starling, not Buffalo Bill! You better explain yourself, or it’s game over for you, mate!”

“Bark.”, Harigand barked. “Oh right, the filter.”, the wolf muttered, then fiddled around with something in his paws.

“I was just trying to find her.”, Harigand explained, relieved at no longer having his every word replaced by a stock sound of a grayhound barking.

“Seems more like you were indulging your repressed fantasies bruv.”, the wolf responded, motioning to the giraffe for another appletini. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

Harigand ignored the slander, and narrowed his eyes. “If you wanted to find out information about Justin Beiber, what type of person would you ask?”

“What?”, the wolf spat, spilling out some of his drink.

“Demographically speaking, who would you target to learn about Justin Beiber?”, Harigand asked, gesturing to the giraffe to fill his empty Manhattan glass.

“Are you trying to schnooker- uh, scam me mate?”, the wolf replied, his British accent fading briefly. “Just answer me.”, Harigand replied

“I’d ask a fourteen year old girl with daddy issues.”, the wolf answered.

“In other words, a *fan* of Justin Beiber.”, Harigand explained. “Now what’s the quickest way to find a fan of someone? Not just a fan, a superfan. Someone *in love* with Justin Beiber.”

“I guess by-“ “Oh.”, the wolf realized. He tilted his head back and started laughing. “I guess that’s one way to investigate infidelity! Do you do this in real life, Jackie? Pretend to be someone you’re not?”

“Only in phishing emails.”, Harigand responded. “Also, it’s just Jack.”

“Well, nice thinking outside the box, but... it wouldn't work.”, the wolf said. “For several reasons.”

The wolf lapped up some of his spilled appletini, then snapped his fingers. Harigand found himself back in the black void, with the wardrobe and the mirror.

“WOULD YOU LIKE TO BUY THIS AVATAR?”, the menu asked. Harigand selected yes.

“ERROR.”, the menu announced. “USER DIPSHIT_DICKHEAD89 DOES NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT BARK BUCKS. TO BUY 700,000 BARK BUCKS, PLEASE SET UP AN ACCOUNT WITH THE MEDIUM'S FINANCIAL SERVICE CENTER.”

Harigand's confidence deflated, much like his chest. He looked in the mirror and he was a Default Dog again, dressed as and feeling like a Noire Nonce.

“First off, you don't have any Bark Bucks.”, the wolf laughed. “Secondly—”

“I have a player tag over my head that says Dipshit, don't I?”, Harigand finished.

“Way to go and ruin the fun!”, the wolf complained. “Yeah, you do. Figured it'd be too easy if you could see players name, so I modified that out. They can all see your name, though.”

“Well, can you enable names?”

“No.”, the wolf replied, sounding serious. “You'd find her too easily if you had names enabled.”

“I'm investigating infidelity, aren't I?”, Harigand replied. “How can I give my report if I can't even tell the client the name of the fellow our panther is cheating with?”

“Fellow, eh? You know for a detective you're quick to jump to conclusions... fine!”, the wolf huffed.

“I'll enable player names in the HUD. Not mine, of course. But I'm putting a muzzle back on you, you're really annoying when you talk, you know that bruv?”

“Bark.”, Harigand replied, then tried to take a sip of his drink. The drink splashed against a muzzle.

7

Jack Harigand wandered the streets annoyed. Jack Harigand wandered the streets aimlessly. Jack Harigand wandered the streets of Chew York with a literal muzzle tied around his mouth.

“Sorry, dipshit.”, said a passerby named Kyle34 on the streets. “No idea who that is.”

Harigand sighed and moved along. He had zero Bark Bucks. The ingenious disguise he wanted to buy was 700,000 Bark Bucks. The real world exchange for Bark Bucks was one dollar for one hundred Bark Bucks. Harigand wanted to solve the case without taking out a second mortgage on his home, or finally winning his daily Pick 6. He curled his paws into a fist. The drawing was at 7 PM. He had a feeling he was going to miss it.

Lottery tickets aside, he was lucky. Anyone who knew the panther woman would probably know she wasn't named “dipshit.” And now that player names were viewable, Harigand was able to tell

the difference between a living human being and an NPC. Human names were colored blue, while NPC names were colored green. Suddenly, Harigand's tail drooped between his legs. What if the panther woman he was after was actually an NPC? The wolf had called the infidelity case a "test", after all, and seemed quite reluctant to enable player names. Harigand shook his head. There was no point in fixating on that now. Green Text or Blue Text, NPC or player, he'd find her. He just needed somewhere to look.

Harigand gazed back up at the sky. The floating colosseum had gone, but the pop-ups remained. "Special Barks Buck Offer!", read one less than promising entry. "Server transfer offer!", read another. Harigand cringed. As he suspected. The game he was playing through the Medium had multiple servers. The panther woman could be right across the street from him, but it didn't matter if she was on a different server.

He let his horror subside, and continued investigating the pop-ups. "YOUR AD HERE!", read one. Harigand clicked on it. The price for the ad for a day was 50,000 Bark Bucks. In other words, 500 dollars. He declined. It would take 500 dollars to repair his superglued desk. Harigand almost gave up hope, before he saw one last pop-up.

The pop-up was simple. It said – "Be a bad boy." The words did not interest Harigand as much as the picture which accompanied them – a golden dog bowl held suggestively in the mouth of a busty canine girl. A golden dog bowl, or in other words, a *golden kennel*.

His tail wagging, Harigand clicked on the advertisement. He ignored the text box that said "VIP rates", "Drink Menu" and skipped straight to "Location." To his excitement, he saw the address of the golden kennel – 1 Leash Street off of Barkington Avenue. His excitement faded when he realized he had no idea where that was. Harigand moved his paws to his temple and pinched his forehead. "Screenshot Added To Inventory.", an electronic voice chimed.

Harigand pinched the menu in his peripheral vision. Now, in addition to the flyer-sized photo of the panther woman, he had a flyer-sized photo of the nightclub's location. That was something. Harigand took the screenshot out of his inventory, and rushed towards the first blue named animal he could find.

"Fuck off, dipshit!", cried a surly looking elephant woman named Julie45.

"I'm not into bondage, sssssorry.", said a snake man named SlitherS.

"What is this, some kind of RP thing?", laughed a monkey girl named BloodbathXxKillThemAll. Harigand paused, then reluctantly nodded his head. "So what, you looking for a partner?", the monkey girl asked. Harigand shook his head. "Directions?", the malevolently monikered monkey guessed. Harigand paused, then eagerly nodded his head.

"Oh, that's easy!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll chimed. "Just take the Pub-Way on the corner ten stops north, then head east three blocks." She paused, concerned. "Do you have bark bucks for the fare?"

Harigand's tail drooped between his legs. "Aw, sweetie...", BloodbathXxKillThemAll cooed, then reached out and handed Harigand a small satchel. "Take this. It's my treat!" With some hesitation, Harigand accepted the Bark Bucks from the monkey woman. "Add me to your friendlist!", the friendly woman cried, as Harigand had +666 Bark Bucks added to his inventory.

The fare for the Pub-Way was 200 Bark Bucks. After fumbling a little, Harigand was able to pay the fare and get a ticket from the machine. The Pub-Way very much resembled the New York City subway, except in place of a train was a giant, elongated pub, with riding satchels atop its back. Harigand climbed on the giant canine with apprehension, but found a seat easy enough.

"Hey!", cried the hawk woman next to him. "No tail-spreading!" Embarrassed, Harigand tucked away his (wagging) tail. Besides that, and a crazed looking chihuahua man that ranted about how the Medium was psychically harvesting people's thoughts, the ride on the Pub-Way was fairly uneventful. Harigand got off on the tenth stop, and headed up the stairs back to the street level of Chew York.

When Harigand emerged from the Pub-Way, he found himself in a harbor district. Unlike Manhattan's harbor, however, the streets themselves were flooded, like Venice. According to BloodbathXxKillThemAll, the Golden Kennel was three blocks to the east. Harigand looked to the east, and saw a flooded street, with gondola rides being offered for 200 Bark Bucks. Harigand had 466 Bark Bucks remaining.

So he swam.

Well, swimming was one way of describing what Harigand did. "Doggy paddle" would be another. "Thrash through the waters like an epileptic duck" was *actually* how Harigand traversed the three blocks.

Water in the Medium felt like water. Cold water. Cold, *city* water. By the time Harigand climbed out of the canal, he was freezing and rancid. His fur and clothes was soaked. But he still had 466 Bark Bucks.

The Golden Kennel was located directly across the wharf Harigand washed up on. The building looked like an abandoned warehouse, with fog and neon light flooding through its cracks and crevices. Loud bass tracks reverberated from the building, in a steady "UNTZ UNTZ UNTZ UNTZ."

Harigand checked the inventory in his peripheral vision, and put a paw over the Bark Bucks BloodbathXxKillThemAll had given him. He withdrew his entire account, which manifested in his palm-pad as a small wallet. "No cover fee, sir!", said the bouncer in front of the building, cheerily.

Soaked to the brim of his trilby, and with 466 unspent Bark Bucks, Jack Harigand sauntered into the Golden Kennel.

Why the Kennel was called "Golden" was anyone's guess. The inside of the building was very much like the outside – dilapidated, foggy, and purple. From a sign in the lobby, Harigand ascertained that

there were three floors. The first floor was labeled “Dance”, the second floor was titled “Play”, and the third floor had the epithet of “Private 😊.”

Jack Harigand’s tail tucked between his legs.

8

There was no mistaking it. The smiling face on the third floor’s label was the same smiley used by whoever put sticky notes all over Harigand’s office. The same smiley used by whoever broke in and out of Harigand’s office in the real world twice without leaving a trace. The same smiley used by whoever poured superglue all over his mahogany desk.

“Bark.”, Harigand asked the bouncer, briefly forgetting that he was both literally and metaphorically muzzled. “RP’s on the second floor, Dipshit.”, replied the bouncer.

Harigand stayed on the first. There were plenty of people on it, and more importantly, a bar. Harigand pinched the first photo in his inventory and produced a flyer sized image of the Panther Woman. “Bark.”, he said to the Bartender(a Minotaur), and shoved the flyer in his face. “She’s not working here today.”, the Bartender replied. “You’ll have to make do with one of the others.”

Harigand’s tail wagged. Sure, he still had no idea who the Panther Woman was, but she apparently worked in the Golden Kennel! The mammoth sized Chew York shrunk to a calf! Now all he had to do was *find* her!

He was making good headway in the infidelity aspect of the case, too. Harigand didn’t know what the Panther Woman did for a living, but if she worked *here*, it probably wasn’t compatible with the tenets of monogamy. Harigand had lots of theories, but what he didn’t have was proof. If he could talk, he could obtain statements from the bartender and others at the Golden Kennel, and call it a day.

But he couldn’t talk. He could only bark, and take pictures. And he couldn’t remember how to do *that*. In frustration, Harigand pinched the temple of his forehead. “Screenshot Added To Inventory.”, a robotic voice said. Harigand remembered.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to take pictures of, not on the first floor, anyways. There were tons of players with unique avatars and a scant number of NPCs, but no Panther Woman. Just about the only picture worth taking was of the bartender, since he seemed to know the Panther Woman. The text above the Minotaur’s head read “Bartender.” And was green.

Harigand’s stomach sank. The bartender was an NPC. Harigand’s tail wagged. The bartender was an NPC. He shook his damp fur, spilling water all over the dancefloor. It didn’t matter. “Hey, wipe up after yourself, dipshit!”, cried a nasally, squeaky voice. Harigand turned to the voice, then yelped.

In the midst of the dance-floor, with four tentacles raised, was an octopus man. The octopus was wearing a lab jacket, glasses, and nothing else. His playername was FishermansWife. And he was horrifying.

“Yeah, yeah, just ignore me, asshole.”, the octopus man muttered, as Harigand looked away. “You know we can all smell you, right? Oh, whatever.” The Octopus Man extradited himself from the dancefloor and walked over to the bar. “Hey Bartender, is Nielente working today?”

“She’s not working today.”, the Bartender responded, exactly how he had to Harigand. “You’ll have to make do with one of the others.”

Harigand’s tail began wagging, as he strolled over the bar under the pretense of picking up a few napkins. “Oh shit, you’re one of those masochist types, aren’t you?”, the Octopus groaned, noticing Harigand’s wagging tail. “Clean up that mess and leave me alone.”

Harigand went back to the dancefloor and pretended to clean up the spill. He kept an eye on the Octopus man. He wouldn’t be able to hear him from this distance, but maybe he could—

“Please, get me Nielente.”, the Octopus Man pleaded, taking out a bag of Bark Bucks in anticipation. “It’s important.”

To Harigand’s shock, he *could* hear the Octopus Man! And more acutely, he could *smell* the Octopus Man. The Octopus Man stank of sweat, fish, and for some reason, gasoline.

The Bartender looked at the Octopus man and grinned, maliciously. “That depends, how badly do you want to-“ “Skip.”, said the Octopus Man, shoving the bag of Bark Bucks into the Minotaur’s arms. “I might be able to make an exception for you, if you can-“ “Skip.”, said the Octopus Man, producing another bag of Bark Bucks. “Skip, skip, skip.”, the Octopus Man repeated, shoving a bag of Chew York currency into the NPC’s arms each time he did so. The Minotaur Bartender looked to the left and the right, then nodded his head. “Ok, I’ll make an-“

“-exception for you, but just this one time.”, the Octopus Man said, syncing his words with the Minotaur’s. “Yeah, you said that the last five times.” The Octopus Man raised a tentacle in the air. “Meet her on the third floor in three minutes.”, he said, right before the bartender did.

Harigand waited two minutes. Two minutes on the dance floor, more than enough time for the Octopus Man to be out of sight, but far from out of mind. He didn’t care that the bartender was an NPC, and that, in all likelihood, so was the Panther Woman. This was his chance. And all he’d have to do was pinch his temple.

Well, that and climb up three flights of stairs. Fortunately, the door to the room labeled “Private 😊” was ajar. Even more fortunately, the room labeled “Private 😊” was dark, dark enough for Harigand to enter the room without making a sound. The thick smell of perfume and incense permeated through the air.

“Oooh, it’s you.”, a feminine voice cooed in the darkness. “My favorite customer.”

"You say that to everyone.", the voice belonging to the Octopus man replied.

"So what will it be baby? Cuddles? Kisses? Or... something *extra*?", the feminine voice asked.

"You're not programmed to do something extra.", the Octopus Man's voice replied, then paused.
"Cuddles."

"Ooooo, cuddles it is.", the feminine voice replied. "I just love to cuddle with a big, strong man."

"Just shut up and hold me.", the Octopus Man answered. "Hold me and my SIX tentacles."

Harigand raised an eyebrow. Had he been mistaken? Was the Octopus Man actually a squid man?

"I'll hold whatever you want me to, babe.", the feminine voice cooed.

Harigand crouched down, then moved silently towards the pair of voices. All he had to do was take a few pictures of the Panther Woman and the Octopus Man in a compromising position, and his job would be done.

After crawling behind a purple armchair, Harigand had his chance. The Octopus Man rested his head on the Panther Woman's lap, and sprawled out all eight of his tentacles across the sofa. His lab coat and glasses were sprawled across the floor, along with a lacy red dress.

"Life is so tough these days.", the Octopus Man complained. "I had to spend nearly FORTY FIVE thousand Barks Bucks just to get here."

Harigand pinched his temple to get a snapshot of the naked couple, then paused. That was the second time the Octopus Man had said a number emphatically.

"Money well spent, love.", the Panther Woman replied, stroking the Octopus Man's forehead.

"Your prices have gone up. Last time I only had to spend TWENTY THREE thousand Bark Bucks."

"You can't put a price on quality."

Harigand pinched his temple again, this time being sure to get a picture of the discarded clothing on the floor.

"That's true.", the Octopus Man replied, in a daze. "You're the only comfort I have in this kusoge. You and your BIG TITS. I wish you had THIRTEEN pairs of tits!"

"Language, love.", the Panther Woman gently reprimanded.

"I can't help it!", FishermansWife whined. "Most people that play this are kids pretending to be men, and men pretending to be woman. You're like, one of EIGHT people I can trust."

FishermansWife paused. "Oh wait, you're an NPC. Who cares about NPC? There's at least SEVENTY NINE of you."

The Octopus Man yawned, then suddenly stood up. "Well, I think I'm done here."

"You still have twenty minutes left in your session, love.", the Panther Woman chimed.

"Give it to the next chump who walks in.", FishermansWife retorted, waving a tentacle. The Octopus Man put his lab coat and glasses back on, then left. Harigand froze in his hiding place. For a moment, the tentacled man seemed to make direct eye contact with him.

But he didn't, since he left the private room without incident. Harigand's heart calmed down, and he started crawling back towards the exit, photos in tow.

"You can come out now, Mr. Harigand.", the Panther Woman said, bluntly.

9

Jack Harigand did not come out of his hiding space. "Oh, come now.", the Panther Woman cooed. "I don't bite."

Reluctantly, Harigand stood up, and looked askance at the half naked Panther Woman. The green NPC tag above her head read "Nielente."

"Confused?", Nielente asked. "Don't be. You should know by now that things in the Medium are never what they seem."

"Bark.", Harigand barked. The Panther Woman giggled. "Oh, *he* muzzled you. That's so cute!"

"Bark.", Harigand barked, somewhat exasperated.

The Panther Woman stepped forward, and reached her hand towards Harigand's muzzle.

"Let me take that off of you..." Harigand recoiled at the touch.

"Oh, am I too immodest for you?", Nielente asked. "Ok then, close your eyes..."

Harigand reluctantly shut his eyes. When he opened them, the leather muzzle the wolf had put on him had vanished.

"*He's* good with his little pranks, but it's nothing I can't hotfix.", Nielente said, now wearing a dress. "So tell me, Mr. Detective, why have you been asking every bartender in the city about me?"

"Bark.", Harigand barked, then cleared his throat. "I only asked two bartenders."

"Two bartenders, four players, and one *big bad wolf*.", Nielente chimed. "Don't try to deny it, Mr. Harigand. I have the logs right here."

"Infidelity case.", Harigand admitted.

"Oh, an infidelity case...", Nielente said, slurring her words. "Did you get what you came for?"

Harigand looked down where the Panther Woman's dress had been, then at the couch behind her.

"Sorta."

"Well, this might come as a shock to you Mr. Harigand, but I'm not actually married.", Nielente stated.

"I don't care.", Harigand admitted, slowly backing towards the door.

"A detective doesn't care about the truth?"

"Depends on the truth.", Harigand retorted. He was about three paces away from the exit, now.

"Well, let me tell you all the truth you need to know.", Nielente said, her voice as soft as a whisper.

The green tagged NPC ran right up to the digital dog detective, and opened the door behind him.

"They're *torturing us*, Mr. Harigand."

Then, with a soft but firm touch, Nielente shoved Jack Harigand through the private room's exit, and down a flight of stairs.

10

Harigand took the gondola on his way back. The fall hadn't broken anything, but his limbs ached, his fur stank, and he was *tired*. The trip back to the rooftop bar was uneventful, well, at least as uneventful as a voyage in virtual reality could be. The colosseum in the sky announced another Barks Buck giveaway, which he ignored.

One ride on a giant pug later and limp down a block later, and he was back at the entrance of the rooftop bar. He rode the elevator up in silence. The sky was beginning to show signs of dusk, or dawn, or something involving sunlight.

When Harigand walked out into the rooftop bar, he saw that he was the only one there. Not even the Giraffe bartender was present. He sat down on a barstool, and sighed.

"So did you crack the case?", a mischievous voice asked. Harigand looked to his left to find the Wolf sitting besides him, appletini in hand.

"Sorta.", Harigand replied, then grabbed the four photos in his inventory.

"Sure looks like infidelity to me!", the Wolf cried, delighted. "And to think I was starting to doubt you, mate!"

"Don't stop just yet.", Harigand replied. "There was something off about the whole thing."

The Wolf set down his appletini, then lowered his voice. "Such as?"

"First, Nielente says she isn't married."

“Oh, they all say that.”, the Wolf scoffed.

“Second, Nielente is an NPC.”

“Sounds like she was pretty chatty for an NPC.”, the Wolf retorted.

“Finally...”, Harigand wheezed. “She said “they are torturing us.”

The Wolf’s expression darkened. “She did, did she? Did she tell you “they” were?”

“No.”, Harigand replied.

“I wouldn’t worry about it, bruv!”, the Wolf declared, triumphantly, then tapped on the table. “Oh, by the way, did the Octopus guy say or do anything strange?”

Harigand nodded his head. “Yes. While cuddling with Nielente, he said a few words emphatically.”

“Emphatically?”, the Wolf asked.

“Loudly.”, Harigand clarified. “He said a few words and numbers loudly.”

“What were those numbers, Harigand?”, the Wolf asked, all pretense of light-heartedness gone.

Harigand narrowed his eyes. “7, 46, 24, 14, 9, and 80.”, he lied.

“Wonderful!”, the Wolf laughed. “Well, congratulations Harigand, you’ve passed the test! You can log out now!”

“By doing what?”

“Just say the words “log out!”, you hoosier!”, the Wolf giggled. “Oh, this is great! You’ll get your cut tomorrow, you brilliant, brilliant man! Hey, want to stay for a drink?”, he asked. “It’s my treat!”

“Log out.”, Harigand said.

The world around him faded to black. The fur melted off his body and hands. The sewage smell disappeared, along with the aches he had gotten from falling down the stairs. Slowly, Harigand became aware of a weight atop his head. He lifted the weight off his head, and was back in the world of the living, sitting still behind his desk.

Jack Harigand unplugged the helmet, and gently placed it back in the box labeled “the Medium.”

Then puked.

11

Jack Harigand spent most of the next day sleeping and vomiting. It was dawn when he first logged into the Medium, and it was dawn when he logged out. He had been trapped inside the virtual world for more than a day.

"Never again.", he wheezed, in-between dry-heaves. Harigand looked at the clock. It was 7:59 PM. He walked scrounged through the mess on his desk to find a television remote and the three lottery tickets he had brushed away while using the Medium. He changed the channel to channel 7.

"Thanks for tuning in!", a blonde cheery newswoman in front of a capsule machine chimed. "In just a moment, we'll be drawing the numbers for tonight's Pick-6! Tonight's jackpot is worth one hundred and fifty million dollars, so good luck everyone!"

Harigand looked at his tickets. The first one had permutations of seven, the second, permutations of 8. 7 was lucky in Western Culture, and 8 was a symbol of completeness in Eastern. The third just had numbers picked at random.

"Alright, the first number...", the lady on the television said, and picked a spinning ball from the capsule machine behind her.

"Six!", the lady announced. Harigand's shoulders deflated. All three of his tickets were disqualified from the jackpot. He kept listening to see if any of the other numbers matched.

"Forty Five!", the anchorwoman continued, placing a ball with the number forty five right next to the ball with the number 6. Harigand tore up his first ticket.

"Twenty Three!", the anchorwoman said. Harigand dropped his other two tickets on the floor. There was no way...

"The fourth number is... thirteen!", the lottery woman continued.

Harigand's stomach began to curl.

"And the fifth number is..." Harigand didn't even have to look at the television.

"Eight...", he said, right before the blonde woman did.

"And finally, the last number for tonight's Pick-6 is..."

"79.", Harigand finished, before the lady on the television did.

"And those are the numbers for tonight's pick-six! Congratulations to the winner!"

Harigand dry-heaved once more, then passed out.

He was woken up by a loud banging on his office door. "Maintenance!", a man with a Mid-Western accent cried. "Maintenance!"

In a daze, Harigand opened his office's door to find a bearded mildly over-weight man in a tracksuit standing there. "I didn't order any maintenance."

The bearded man reached into his track suit and produced a Glock 17. "Let me have a look inside anyways.", he said, smiling. Jack Harigand raised his hands over his head, and slowly backed inside the office.

"Where is it?", the man with the midwestern accent asked, closing the door.

"Where is... what?"

"The ticket!", the man with the midwestern accent hissed. "Where did you put the ticket!"

Wordlessly, Harigand glanced at the three lottery tickets he had dropped the night before.

"Ah, thank you kindly.", said the Midwestern man. He picked up Harigand's three lottery tickets and scowled. "Not these!", he snapped. "The *winning* ticket!"

Harigand looked at the gun in the man's hand. "I don't have a winning lottery ticket."

"Don't give me that shit, bruv!", the Midwestern man snapped. "You fed me the wrong numbers!"

Harigand paused. "...Wolf?", he asked. "Oh, aren't you a regular Sherlock Holmes!", the overweight man spat. "Now stop stalling and give me the ticket!"

"Don't have one."

"Oh, bull!", the midwestern cum cockney man cried. "You can't con a con, mate!"

"This is Memphis.", Harigand said, choosing his words very carefully.

"No bloody shit this is Memphis!", the man who was apparently the Wolf yelled. "I drove half a day just to get here."

"Memphis is in Tennessee.", Harigand continued.

"So?!", the Wolf spat.

"Tennessee has an open record for lottery winners.", Jack Harigand explained. "You can check the records. I didn't win."

The bearded man stared at Harigand. "You didn't win yet.", he whispered.

"Check the records tomorrow, or the next day, or next week.", Harigand continued. "Check them next year, if you feel like it. I lied to you about the numbers, but I didn't win."

"WHY THE BLOODY HELL DID YOU LIE TO ME?!", the Wolf yelled, his gun swaying to the side.

Harigand charged the overweight man, and elbowed him in the face. "Guh!", the man groaned. Harigand snatched the Glock 17 out of his hands, and pointed it at the center mass of the overweight man.

"Because I'm not afraid of the big bad wolf.", he hissed, then squeezed the trigger.

A stream of water came out.

“S-surprise!”, the Wolf stammered. “I... uh... I wasn’t going to kill you bruv, I just wanted my-“

Harigand punched the man in the face.

“Ow, fuck!”, the Wolf shrieked.

“How did you break into my office?”, Harigand asked. “Why did you trap me in that ridiculous game?”

“I posed as maintenance-“

“No, not that.”, Harigand growled. “Earlier. When you put that helmet and those sticky notes all over.”

“I didn’t!”, the Wolf sobbed. “I was paid to give you the test-“

“The *scam*.”, Harigand corrected.

“The test- by someone at MenteTech!”

“And your “test” just so happened to involve insider trading of lottery numbers, did it?”, Harigand scoffed.

“It didn’t!”, the Wolf snarled. “The numbers were *predicted*, not planted!”

“They sure as hell seemed planted to me.”, Harigand hissed. “Do you take me for an idiot?”

“Yes-”, the bearded man babbled, before taking a haymaker to the stomach.

“Maybe so, but I’m not *that* big of an idiot.”, Harigand said, reaching into his overcoat for a pair of handcuffs. “I saw through that Octopus’s scam the moment he locked eyes with me.”

Harigand handcuffed the Wolf to the radiator by his right hand. “Sit tight. I’m going to make a call.”

“Wait, wait, there’s no need to call the cops!”, the Wolf protested. “All I did was point a super soaker at you!”

“You entered my office under false pretenses and pointed a gun at me. Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t have your ass sent to state.”

“Fifteen million dollars.”, answered the Wolf.

Harigand looked at his ruined desk, then at a dilapidated wall in the office.

“I’m listening.”, he said.

“So it’s like this.”, the not so wolfish Wolf said, a glass of bourbon in his hand. “You ever been to Target?”

“The supermarket?”, Harigand asked.

“Yeah, the supermarket. With the giant red target logo. Ever been?”

“A couple of times.”, Harigand replied, as he poured himself a drink.

“Well, there was this girl – young lady the age of 19 or so. She had a boyfriend, bright future, the works. But she shops at Target and likes to collect coupons. So one day—”

“Is this going anywhere?”, Harigand asked, as he fiddled with the Wolf’s handcuffs.

“I’m getting to it!”, the Wolf snapped, shaking his swollen wrist. “So one day this girl checks her Target coupon books, and sees advertisements for diapers, baby formula, and a crib.”

“So?”

“So?!” the Wolf gasped. “The girl was 19. She didn’t have any kids. But spurred on by these coupons, the girl takes a pregnancy test and found out that -bam! She’s pregnant.”

“Sounds like a coincidence to me.”

“But it wasn’t a coincidence!”, the Wolf exclaimed. “From her buying habits, shopping frequencies, and coupon usage, Target’s marketing algorithms figured out she was pregnant *before* she did!”

“So?”, Harigand asked.

“So?!”, the Wolf sputtered. “Mate, in other words, Target *predicted* the future!”

“No.”, Harigand answered. “Target did not predict the future.” He took a sip from his glass. “They just *deduced* the present.”

“You’re missing the point!”, the Wolf exclaimed. “Deduce, predict, the point is that Target’s algorithms were miles ahead of human perception, far ahead of the young lady’s biological clock!” The Wolf took a sip of his bourbon, then frowned. “Do you have anything sweeter?”

“Only vodka.”, Harigand answered. “So what, you’re saying that those numbers you surreptitiously had me report were predicted by some supercomputer?”

“Basically.”, the Wolf replied. “And there’s nothing illegal about using predictions to make money.”

“If there’s nothing illegal about it, why did you hide behind three layers of deniability?”, Harigand asked.

“Because nothing leaks like information!”, the Wolf cried, reluctantly taking another sip of the bourbon. “The safest way to get the numbers was—”

“To have an octopus erotically roleplay with a panther and be recorded by a digital canine.”, Harigand finished. “Well, points for creativity.”

Harigand downed his glass of bourbon, then sighed.

“Home invasion and brandishing an imitation firearm aside, what you’re doing is boilerplate. Do you know how many people have tried to scam the stock market by claiming a psychic told them to do it?”

“But we’re not scamming the stock market, that’s the brilliance of it!”, the Wolf replied. “We’re just picking numbers, not choosing options or shorting indexes. We don’t have to justify anything!”

“150 million dollars doesn’t just disappear without someone, somewhere, asking questions.”, Harigan explained. “If not publicly, then privately.”

“Let them ask questions.”, the Wolf answered. “They won’t be able to prove anything, and even if they do, predicting the result of something isn’t against the law.”

“So who... or what is this oracle of Delphi, exactly?”, Harigand asked.

“Oracle of what?”, the Wolf asked.

“Forget it.”, Harigand sighed. “In other words, *how* are you predicting these lottery numbers?”

“Algorithms.”, the Wolf answered.

“Algorithms to determine what spinning ball lands where, and when?”, Harigand asked, skeptical.

“Can you show me one of these algorithms?”

“Never really was a math guy.”, the Wolf admitted, sheepishly, then shook his head. “Look, you’re missing the point! The numbers were *right!*”

“The numbers were right...”, Harigand admitted, “But *why* they were right is up in the air. Stefan Mandel won the lottery fourteen times, but he didn’t do so by using a crystal ball that told him the winning combination. He exploited a flaw in the system that guaranteed a win after buying a certain amount of tickets. Statistics, not sorcery.”

“Stefan Mandel didn’t live in a world with the Medium.”, the Wolf said with a wink. “Winning the lottery is just the tip of the iceberg, Mr. Harigand.”

The overweight man put down his drink, and walked to the exit of Harigand’s office.

“But if you don’t believe me, just log onto the Medium this Friday, at 7 AM. I’ll prove it to you.”

Harigand glanced at the phone, then back at the man with the Wolfish avatar.

“Prove what?”, he asked.

A glimmer of light spread through the Pseudo-Brit’s eyes.

“Everything.”, he replied.

13

Harigand’s hand lingered over his phone once the not-quite Maintenance man left. The smart thing to do would be to call the cops. Algorithms aside, barreling into an office with a gun was quite illegal. And if the Wolf was willing to break the law to obtain a winning lottery ticket one way, he was probably willing to break the law to obtain one the other way. Harigand wasn’t a tech guy, but hacking a headset to trap the user in a video game also did not seem to be within the confines of the law.

But he really wanted to refurbish his desk. Moreover, Harigand felt an emotion he had not felt in a long time – curiosity. In Harigand’s career as a private investigator, Occam’s Razor reigned supreme. A child kept coming to school with a black eye? He was being abused by his father. A married woman didn’t answer her phone whenever her husband was away on business? She was cheating on him. The solution was always simple, and hardly ever pleasant.

Applying Occam’s Razor to the wolf yielded a very simple answer: The Wolf was a rainmaking con-man. Trusting him would be like trusting, well, a wolf. Harigand was more likely to get 15 million dollars from a girl scout than he was from the lupus. The Wolf would dazzle him with some predictions, but sooner or later, a complication to the scheme would come up. The Wolf would ask Harigand for a small fee that would pale in comparison to the jackpot, and then mysteriously vanish from the face of the earth.

Ironically, it was the Wolf’s incriminating actions that stopped Harigand from calling the police. Despite their reputation, con-men were not risk takers. Like the casinos in Vegas, conmen made their living by passing on the risk to others. No matter what the Wolf’s scheme *really* was, crossing multiple state lines to break and enter into Harigand’s office with a gun demonstrated a level of risk far and above what the average con would be willing to take.

Harigand’s reasoning was interrupted by seeing the slightest hint of yellow in his peripheral vision. Attached to his television were two more sticky notes.

“He’s lying to you 😏.”, read the first.

“I am too 😏.”, read the second.

Harigand ignored the logical paradox, and checked the playback of his office’s closed circuit television. The recording showed ample coverage of the Wolf’s armed entry into Harigand’s office, along with audio of their entire conversation. Harigand transferred the audio and video onto a flash drive, then emailed himself an additional copy. He isolated the frame of the CCTV’s video which best captured the Wolf’s face, and printed it five times. Harigand paused, then fetched an

ancient disposal camera from the clutter atop his desk. He took twenty pictures of the printed images, then returned to reviewing the CCTV footage to solve the case of the spontaneous smiling sticky notes.

Harigand didn't solve the case of the spontaneous smiling sticky notes. The camera footage showed them to be nowhere one moment, and attached to his desk and television the next. He scanned the sky behind his windows and checked to see if the footage was looped; it wasn't.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harigand saw a glint of yellow on the sleeve of his jacket. He grabbed at it. It was a yellow sticky note. With a twisted stomach, Harigand reluctantly read what was scribbled on the yellow piece of parchment.

"You're still in the game 😊"

14

Jack Harigand knew there was a perfectly good explanation for how the sticky notes appeared on his jacket and in his office. Hallucinogenics in the air, or slight of hand during his tussle with the Wolf's real life counterpart. Harigand went to the restroom, took off his shirt, then looked at himself in the mirror. He wasn't a cartoon dog. He was a black haired man in his late forties, clean shaven and with a tattoo which read "Sam" that ran across his right bicep. He pinched himself. He could feel pain. But then again, he could feel pain in the Medium too. Harigand drew some water from the sink, and splashed it over his face.

He *felt* like he was in the real world. "Logout!", he said aloud. Nothing happened. Harigand pinched a spot in his peripheral vision. The inventory screen did not come up. Harigand squeezed his temple. No screenshots or pictures were taken. A bit reassured but still uneasy, Harigand left the restroom, and got back to work.

The Wolf had told him to log into the Medium on Friday. Today was a Wednesday. Harigand had two days to decide. Two days to call the cops, or to continue following the Wolf down the rabbit hole. But before he could do any of that, he had to take care of a few things.

First, Harigand approached the Medium, and stuffed the oversized helmet into a satchel. Then Harigand took four pieces of waxpaper from behind his desk. He put the wax paper underneath the welcome mat outside his office. If he was lucky, he'd get a footprint. If he was unlucky, he'd at least know if the paper had been moved. Either way, the wax paper would tell him if someone intruded in his office while he was away.

A voice in the back of Harigand's head urged him to just call the police. They had far more resources and manpower than he did, and he had the Wolf dead to rights on breaking and entering. But breaking and entering happened every day. Predicting, smuggling, and communicate the lottery numbers didn't.

Jack Harigand never considered himself a Luddite. When his computer had problems he would often be able to repair them on his own, even when he had to crack open a motherboard. He owned a smartphone, and knew how to access and use the internet and the darkweb. But he was no hacker. Maintaining machines he could do, but tampering with them esoterically was something he couldn't do.

So he drove to someone who could. Jack Harigand drove his Grand American: Touring to the most qualified person in the most qualified space. He drove to Gamestop.

"Is Doug here?", Harigand asked, taking off his motorcycle helmet with one hand and holding the satchel with the Medium with the other.

"Uh, he is, but he's on break.", said a scrawny cashier with a nametag reading "Paul."

"Can you get him now?", Harigand asked. "It's urgent."

"Sorry, a break's a break.", Paul replied, then noticed Harigand's satchel. "Are you here to make a return?"

"Something like that.", Harigand mumbled, then cleared his throat. "How much longer will Doug be on break?"

"Ten minutes or so.", Paul responded. "Can I help you with anything in the mean-time?"

Harigand began to shake his head, then stopped. "You could tell me about the Medium."

Paul's eyes seem to gloss over as he cleared his throat and recited "The Medium is the world's premiere entertainment device. With both haptic feedback and half dive capabilities, the Medium delivers a revolutionary experience like no other."

Harigand raised an eyebrow. "Half-dive?", he asked, confused.

"Look man, I just sell the thing, I don't make it.", Paul replied.

"You don't make it *or* sell it!", a cheery voice from the Gamestop's backroom chimed. A short, buff man with the nametag "Bill" walked out.

"Thought you were on break.", Harigand said with a smirk.

"No no no, you're mistaken. Doug's on break.", said Doug. "Bill is not."

"Why the name-change, "Bill?", Harigand asked.

"Standard practice.", the man Harigand knew as Doug responded. "You have no idea of the wrath a humble retail employee can invite upon himself." Doug clapped his hands. "So why are you here, Mr. Harigand? Birthday gift for Sam?"

Harigand stared down at his shoes. "...No.", he whispered, then cleared his throat and pushed over the satchel. "I want you to take a look at this."

"Oooh, a mystery box.", Doug cooed, then opened the satchel. "Whoa!", he cried, upon seeing the Medium. "Where did you get one of these?"

"Appeared in my office one morning.", Harigand said, truthfully. "Can you check it to see if there's any malware or the like on it?"

"Do you have a super computer?", Doug asked. "Because if you want me to scan a half dive virtual reality helmet for malware, I'll need a super computer."

Harigand raised an eyebrow again. "Half dive, full dive – what does that mean again?"

"Oh, right I forgot you were into retro games.", Doug said, then scratched his chin. "Remember those ancient games, Fallout 3 and Fallout New Vegas?"

"Yes.", Harigand answered.

"Well, full dive would be like Tranquility Lane in Fallout 3. A simulation so convincing that your brain thinks it's actually real. Real Boltzmann Brain type stuff. Half dive would be like the flight simulators from Fallout New Vegas. A simulation that takes place alongside reality, rather than replacing reality entirely like full-dive. Like talking to someone and using your phone to surf the net at the same time."

"This is full-dive.", Harigand said, gesturing to the Medium.

"No way.", Doug answered, flatly. "Mentetech's full-dive isn't even in alpha, let alone beta."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you.", Harigand responded. "It's full-dive. Can you tell me if there's anything wrong with it?"

"Probably not.", Doug admitted, then put his hands together. "But can I look at it anyways?", he pleaded. Harigand looked wistfully at a copy of Mario Kart, then nodded his head.

Doug was deathly silent as he took a screwdriver and began looking through the interior circuitry of the Medium. Occasional pokes and prods were punctuated by a "Hmm", "Interesting", and "I see..." Finally, after about thirty minutes of fiddling, Doug put the screws of the Medium back on and gave the helmet back to Harigand.

"I don't know if what you've got there is half-dive or full-dive...", Doug began, "But its light years ahead of the Medium we sell."

"What's it got?", Harigand asked.

"A better question would be what doesn't it got?", Doug replied. "Now tell me, when you were using this device, were you able to smell anything?"

"...Yes.", Harigand answered, remembering his dip in Chew York's canals. "Well, you shouldn't have been.", Doug replied. "This headset doesn't have a scent diffuser."

"Well, I did smell stuff. A whole lot of stuff.", Harigand explained. "Also, when I got into a fight, or fell down some stairs, I felt pain."

"Like, in your legs?", Doug asked in disbelief. "In my legs, arms, all over."

"Maybe this really *is* full-dive.", Doug muttered. He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a green microchip. "Here, this was attached to the inside of the helmet. It seemed incongruous to the rest of the Medium's circuitry, so I pulled it out."

"Thanks.", Jack muttered, hoping the chip wasn't important. He put the Medium back in its satchel and headed towards the Gamestop's exit, before pausing. "Hey, one more thing.", Harigand asked. "You know that pre-order I placed a month ago?"

"Yeah, the one for Mario Kart 17.", Doug responded. "What about it?"

"Cancel it.", Harigand said with a sigh.

16

Harigand rode his motorcycle back to the office. The wax paper he placed under his welcome mat remained undisturbed, and he didn't find any more yellow sticky notes. What he did find was the mail.

The mail was mostly advertisements along with the usual letter; an overdue hospital bill. And as usual, Harigand declined to pay it. Part of him wanted to settle the invoice before it was turned over to collections, but part of him reasoned that he shouldn't pay doctors for *failing* at their job.

Harigand checked the CCTV recordings to see if anyone dropped by when he was away. Unsurprisingly, the only person he saw was the mailman. He sighed. It was still Wednesday, Wednesday evening. The Wolf told him to log into the Medium on Friday. If the Wolf lived where he claimed he did, it would take him at least half a day to return. He was probably in Missouri by now.

So Harigand decided to log back into the Medium. He'd have six hours to himself, without some Midwestern Pseudo Brit mocking or muzzling him. He pressed record on an old fashioned tape recorder, and placed it on his desk next to the helmet. Then he put on the helmet. Then he logged in.

The Medium

Once again, light flashed around in a kaleidoscopic prismatic display. Once again red text read the name of the full-dive helmet Harigand was wearing. And once again blue text was displayed showing Harigand's avatar and clothing.

Selected Avatar: Default Dog

Selected Outfit: Noire Nonce

Harigand kept the avatar as Default Dog, since he was used to the feel of it. But he changed his outfit to Tracksuit Treasure. So now he looked like a Slavic knockoff of Scruff McGruff, instead of just a regular knockoff.

Harigand had logged out at the rooftop bar, so he expected to log in there. Instead, he found himself standing in a glass room that floated miles above Chew York. Even the floating colleseum Harigand had saw when he first logged into the Medium was below him. Experiencing a sense of vertigo, Harigand began whistling Elton John's "Rocket Man." Poorly.

The whistling was partly to calm him down, but partly to see if the tape recorder on his desk would pick up the sound. The white clouds around the floating glass room turned dark, and the crash of thunder rang out. "ARE YOU READY FOR TODAY'S BARK BUCKS GIVEAWAY?!!", cried a familiar voice.

"THE RULES ARE SIMPLE.", the announcer declared. "DIVE THROUGH THE FIVE RINGS AND REACH THE CENTER OF THE COLLESEUM BEFORE YOUR OPPONENT DOES!" Harigand looked around, but couldn't see an opponent. He couldn't see anything, except-

"READY?", the Annoucer asked, apathetic to Harigand's disorientation. " THREE... TWO... ONE... GO!"

The glass beneath Harigand shattered, and he entered a state of free fall. Fortunately, the first ring was directly below what remained of the glass room, and Harigand plummeted through it with few problems. The second ring was off a bit to the right. Harigand spread his arms and paws to catch as much wind as he could, and spun his body counterclockwise.

That was enough for him to get through the second ring. It was about at this time that Harigand noticed another player plummeting through the skies with no parachute to speak of – the monkey girl who had given him six hundred and sixty six Bark Bucks; BloodbathxXxKillThemAll.

"WUH-HOO!", she cried, triumphantly soaring down through a third ring before Harigand could. She was about fifty feet ahead of him. Harigand clenched his paws together, and entered a diving pose. He somehow began to fall faster. A voice in the back of his mind reminded him that he could feel pain in the Medium, and that diving headfirst into the Colleseum's marble slabs or Chew York's concrete street would be quite painful, but he ignored that voice. There was a game to win!

Harigand and Bloodbath passed through the fourth ring at the same time. "Hey, it's you!", the monkey girl shouted. "I'm sorry, but I'm gonna win!" The monkey girl accelerated, and passed

through the fifth ring before Harigand could. Harigand clenched his teeth. There was just the center of the Coliseum left now, and thankfully, the center was filled with water. But even while diving, Harigand couldn't accelerate fast enough to pass the monkey girl. So he grabbed her tail instead.

"What are you doing?!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll yelled. Using her tail as leverage, Harigand wrapped his paws firmly around the monkey girl's waist, and then twisted his body so she was lying on top of him. His back hit the coliseum's water before anything else did.

"AND WE HAVE A WINNER!", the announcer declared, as confetti burst down into the pool. "CONGRATULATIONS TO DIPSHIT_DICKHEAD89 FOR REACHING THE CENTER! JOIN US TOMORROW FOR ANOTHER BARK BUCKS GIVEAWAY!"

"You really are a dickhead!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll complained, as Harigand saw "+10000 Bark Bucks" appear over his inventory. "I would have won if you didn't assault me! And what's with that name anyways? Don't you know that kids play this game!?"

Harigand doggy paddled out of the Coliseum's pool, then shook the water out of his fur. "Didn't pick the name.", he muttered. "You were fine with it yesterday."

"Yesterday I thought you were being ironic!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll complained.

"Ironic like your name?", Harigand asked, only to see the monkey girl shake her head. "My name isn't ironic!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll declared. "I really want to kill them all!"

Harigand walked over and took a seat in the floating Coliseum's stands. "And who are they, exactly?"

"MenteTech!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll hissed. "The jerks that made this game, and the Medium!"

"Why do you think they're jerks?", Harigand asked.

"Wait, you can talk?!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll sputtered, a bit late on the uptake. "And they're jerks because they stole the design for the Medium!"

"Stole?", Harigand asked.

"Yeah, stole!", BloodbathXxKillThemAll declared, pointing her hairy index finger at an invisible adversary. "They pulled a Bill Gates on my brother for their stupid full dive research!"

Harigand paused. "A Bill Gates? Like Xbox Bill Gates?"

"Man, you really are a noob.", the monkey girl sighed. "No, not Xbox Bill Gates, MS-Dos Bill Gates!", she said, then scowled. "The pay a pittance for a billion dollar piece of technology Bill Gates."

"Your brother was scammed by Bill Gates?", Harigand asked.

“No, you idiot!”, the monkey girl eeped. “What Bill Gates did to the makers of Dos, Mentetech did to my brother. They paid him a paltry fee for full-dive capacity, something they knew would make them billions! The technology isn’t even in alpha yet, but I know for a fact they’re testing it out!”

Harigand chose not to mention that he was wearing a full dive prototype, and instead asked more about the monkey girl’s brother. “So if full dive is worth so much, why did your brother sell it?”

“He had no choice!”, the monkey girl declared. “He had taken out a lot of debt just to make a working prototype! They preyed on his financial weakness...”, the monkey girl said bitterly, “and took away what he loved.”

“Love?”, Harigand asked.

“He always said that he was making love.” Harigand scratched his ear with his leg, and then paused, surprised he was flexible enough to do that. “I doubt it.”, he snorted, the hospital invoice flashing to the front of his mind.

“You don’t put a price on love.”

“He made a mistake.”, the monkey girl said, agitated. “But I’m going to fix that mistake. I’ll make tons and tons of Bark Bucks, and when I do I’ll get payback for what Mentetech did to my brother!”

“Well, good luck with that.”, Harigand replied, pointedly not mentioning how the monkey girl’s conviction was like a grandma trying to overthrow a casino by putting more quarters in the slot machine. A round pad marked “exit” jutted out from the side of the floating Colosseum, so Harigand headed over there. A flash of blue light later, and Harigand was back on the streets of Chew York, below the clouds instead of above them.

He walked into an alley, and said “Log-out.”

The world went black, and Harigand became aware of a weight atop his head. With a grunt, he pulled the Medium off his head, and was back behind his mahogany desk in the wonderfully familiar clutter of his office.

17

Harigand didn’t hear himself whistling “Rocket Man” when he played back the tape recorder. He had been in the Medium for a little over an hour, and the ancient cassette in the tape recorder could store half of that. But Harigand didn’t hear himself whistling “Rocket Man”, or the announcer declaring the start of the free-fall competition, or BloobathxXxKillThemAll’s melancholy spiel about her brother.

All Harigand heard, at first, was his own breathing. Well, the playback on the tape recorder *sounded* like he was breathing, or snoring, or doing something that involved long inhales and exhales. Things changed ten minutes into the recording. “Ah... AH!”, screamed Harigand’s voice, like he was having a nightmare. Harigand placed the scream around the start of the free-fall. But then Harigand heard something he didn’t say in the Medium. “Sam...”, his voice muttered,

mournfully. "SAM!", he heard himself scream. If his brain was dreaming when wearing the Medium, his body was having a nightmare. Harigand heard his voice moan a few more times, and mutter intangible sleeptalk babble. At about 25 minutes in, Harigand heard his voice scream "2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13!" There was a pause, and then again, Harigand's voice screamed "2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13!" After that there were a few moments of mumbling, and then the recording was over.

Harigand wrote the numbers down on a piece of paper, then checked CCTV. No one had entered his office while he was using the Medium, and his body had remained deathly still during the hour or so he had spent inside the Medium. His voice had listed six numbers – were they the numbers for the lottery drawing tonight? Harigand shook his head. They couldn't be. It was probably just his subconscious throwing out the first six prime numbers he could think of.

In any event, the VR excursion had been a bust. The in-game audio did not register out of game, with everything Harigand said in the Medium staying in the Medium. With his current tools, Harigand couldn't record anything in the Medium, not audio nor video. He could take pictures, sure, but he needed more than pictures to deal with the Wolf.

Harigand tapped his fingers atop his desk. It was night, now. He took his television remote and put on the Pick-Six Drawing.

"Good evening, and welcome to tonight's Pick-Six!", the blonde lady who ran the show chimed. "In just a moment, we'll start drawing to see if anyone has won tonight's jackpot of Two Hundred and Twenty Million Dollars!"

Harigand froze. The jackpot had increased substantially. "Anyways, let's begin!", the blonde lady said. "The first number is... 73!"

Harigand relaxed, as the blonde lady announced five more numbers that were not 3, 5, 7, 11, or 13. His mumbblings had been just that – mumbblings.

Harigand reached for his whiskey decanter, then stopped. Tomorrow would be Thursday, and soon after that it'd be Friday. He had to make some preparations first. The whiskey was left well enough alone.

18

Harigand's goal was simple -- find a way to record the Wolf during their Friday meeting. To record the Wolf *in* the Medium, and to be able to take those recordings *out* of the Medium. As to what Harigand planned to do with those recordings, well, even he didn't know. A small part of him wanted to leverage the real life CCTV footage of the Wolf entering his office with a gun, not to send the Wolf to jail, but to blackmail him. Harigand ignored that part, and also ignored the part of his brain which told him that he should really just go to the Police before it was too late.

Harigand made a quick stop at Doug's Gamestop, an unproductive one. The Medium prototype Harigand was wearing was just too advanced, to the point where even putting the cache of the Medium's screenshots on a PC was an ordeal.

"It's not that I can't do it *eventually*," Doug (his tag today reading Gustave) explained. "I just can't have those screenshots ready for you this century. Too encrypted." Harigand walked over to the Gamestop's display case. "Can you pull screenshots out of this one?", Harigand asked, referring to the retail version of the Medium. "Yeah, and I can record stuff with it too.", Doug answered. "The half dive Medium has a screen. Yours doesn't."

"What does it have?", Harigand asked, confused at how the Medium produced a whole vivid world without having a screen. "Well, by all accounts... a microwave.", Doug answered. "That helmet of yours looks like it was designed to fry people's brains. Have you noticed any adverse effects?"

"Just motion-sickness.", Harigand said with a grimace. He still remembered that day where he alternated between dry heaving and wet heaving. "Just be careful, ok Jack?", Doug asked. "And please, please don't drink before using this." "I won't.", Harigand answered, then turned his eyes to the retail version of the Medium. "So how much for one of the half-dive headsets?"

"Two thousand dollars.", Doug answered, bluntly. Harigand stuck with his prototype. "Hey, just try finding an app or something!", Doug called out to Harigand as he left the Gamestop. "Try buying a camera from the in-game store, Mentetech loves microtransactions!" Harigand returned home, and logged back into the Medium. He couldn't find a video recording app as such, but – yes, that would do! Delighted by his 5,000 Bark Bucks purchase, Harigand logged off for the day.

And then, finally, it was Friday.

19

It was Friday morning. 5 AM. Harigand looked over his (now clean) desk, and then looked expectantly at the Medium atop his desk. One hour slowly passed, then two. Harigand logged in fifteen minutes early. His log in spawn was exactly in the alley where he had logged out, and the alley was a block away from the rooftop bar.

When Harigand got to the rooftop bar, the Wolf was a mess. And not a cool, elegantly dishelved mess. No, the Wolf was downing drinks and looking to and fro impatiently. "Harigand!", he cried out, slurring his words. "Tooksh ya schlong enough!"

"It's five in the morning.", Harigand said drily. "Six o'clock here!", the Wolf belched. "Means you're an hour early."

"An hour before you show me anything and everything.", Harigand replied, sarcastically.

"Oh yeah, about that...", the Wolf began. "You can go to Hell!"

Harigand blinked his eyes. "What?"

"Hell.", the Wolf said, pointing a furry thumb downwards. "It's a secret club down in the sewers. Go there."

“Why?”, Harigand asked.

“Because I said so!”, the Wolf hissed, then snapped his fingers. Nothing happened. “Strange, that should have put a muzzle on you...” The Wolf shrugged his shoulders. “All for the better bruv, you’ll need your voice anyways.”

“Why?”, Harigand asked, remembering the chip Doug had removed from the Medium’s headset.

“So you can do what you do best mate...”, the Wolf declared. “Ask pointless questions. Now, seriously, go to Hell!”

And so Harigand went to Hell. Well, he had to go to the sewers first, and to get to the sewers, he had to leave the rooftop bar and head back to the streets.

At first, Harigand was aghast at where to go. “The sewers” was not the most exact location in a virtual city spanning 33 square miles. He walked the streets until he came across an open manhole that looked like something out of a Tex Avery cartoon. “That’s probably it.”, he muttered, and climbed down.

The sewers were, well, sewers. They smelled like shit and were flowing with shit, albeit anthropomorphic emojis of shit. The poop having blinking eyes and a smile didn’t make things much better. “Hello, dipshit!”, one of the flowing poop emojis cried out to him. “What’s a noobie like you doing down here?”

Harigand tilted his neck. The anthropomorphic piece of poop had neither green text nor blue text above its digital model. “Are you a person?”, he asked. “I’m a player, yeah!”, the talking poop emoji replied, floating downstream. “Well, I used to be. I got a temporary ban, so, here I am.”

“When you get banned you get turned into a piece of poop?”

“Act like a shithead, become a shithead.”, the poop replied, then sighed. “That’s what the mod said to me, anyways.”

“What did you do?”, Harigand asked.

“Oh, nothing terrible!”, the poop emoji said. “I just kinkshamed some of the players in Hell.”

Harigand’s tail began to wag. “You know where Hell is?”, he asked.

“Of course I do!”, the anthropomorphic piece of crap answered. “It’s downstream. Just follow the other shitheads and you’ll get there eventually.”

Harigand thanked the talking piece of poop, then started following the sewers downstream. “Oh wait wait, one more thing!”, the piece of poop cried out.

“If you do get to Hell, can you tell Sam I’m sorry?”

“Who?!”, Harigand asked, his heartbeat increasing.

“Sam. Sam the Human.”, the poop explained. “He’s one of Hell’s features. Tell him MilfFister69 is sorry!”

Harigand ignored the talking poop’s comment, and hurried downstream. He was half tempted to jump in the waste filled waters to expediate the process. There was a “Sam” in Chew York’s “Hell.” There was no way it could be – but maybe –

Harigand slapped his snout and hurried onwards. There was only one way to find out.

Running downstream in the sewers was like running through a maze. Every now and then the waters would turn to the left or the right, making Harigand need to shift to a pathway that went above the emoji infused waters. Harigand ran for quite some time, shifting his direction with the waters, until the hue of the sewers changed from sickly green to an ominous overwhelming red.

His nose scrunched up as the smell of excrement was replaced by the minorly worse smell of fire and brimstone. A sign pointed to the right on the walkway, and read, in inoffensive bubblegum pink

==> Hell

Without a moment’s pause, Harigand heeded the sign and sprinted to the right. Red lights and a thick fog emanated from a man(or anthropomorphic canine) sized hole in the wall. The temperature increased too, replacing the cold damp of the sewers with a dry heat like a sauna. Bass music reverberated in the distance.

Jack Harigand took another step, and then he was in Hell.

Hell had a waiting room.

