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The Empathy Project: A Novel

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The Empathy Project:
A Novel (Part One)

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Written Arts
of Bard College

by

Evan Crommett

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Sproj Acknowledgements (heehee say that three times fast)

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THE
EMPATHY
PROJECT

A NOVEL BY EVAN CRAMMETT

“At night, when the objective world has slunk back into its cavern and left dreamers to their own, there come inspirations and capabilities impossible at any less magical and quiet hour. No one knows whether or not he is a writer unless he has tried writing at night.”

—H.P Lovecraft

“I used to be an adventurer like you. Then I took an arrow in the knee.”

—Skyrim Guard

Elias 1

I stared, glassy-eyed, into the soft glow of my own creation.

“You’re almost there, ma’am,” said an animated doctor on the widescreen in front of us. We could see his face and his arms up to his elbows, but not what he was looking at. As he was speaking, white font typed itself across the bottom of the screen.

LEVEL 1 . THE ORIGIN STORY OF JADEN CHAOS

The cries of a woman in labor could be distinctly heard from the surround-sound speakers. “Just keep pushing!” The doctor said; his sweat droplets glitched as they fell.

I glanced over at the face of the Ubiware representative. He was sitting in the corner with his iPad, expressionless. Had he spotted the glitches?

“It hurts so bad, doctor!” said the woman’s voice. “Something must be very wrong.”

“Everything is fine, miss Anderson,” the doctor assured her. “Look you’re almost there.” The woman’s screams came to a crescendo. “Just one more push and...” There was a close-up of the doctor’s eyes dilating in fear.

“What is it, Doctor?”

“Oh my God,” said the doctor. A nurse behind him fainted. The screen showed the anguished face of the woman.

“What’s wrong with my baby boy?” she shrieked.

“Miss Anderson, your boy is...”

“Tell me what’s wrong with Jaden! Or at least show him to me!”

“He’s wildly overdeveloped.” The doctor’s voice trembled. “His muscles are huge. This is no average child. This is some sort of monster!” The camera cut once again to a close-up of the woman’s face, streaming with tears.

“No, I’m sure he’s fine,” she said, in a state of shock. “Let me have a look.” The woman screamed, then the camera cut back to the doctor. We could now see the bundle of swaddling clothes he was carrying.

“It’s best we put this abomination down before it’s too late,” he said.

“But he’s my son!”

“This *thing* isn’t a he. This isn’t a human being at all. It’s nothing but an error. Sometimes Mother Nature slips up and it’s our job to undo her wrongs before it’s too late.”

“Okay, doctor. Do what you have to do.” Just as the doctor was reaching for a comically large syringe, the camera zoom-cut to a close-up of the baby’s eyes flashing open. In slow motion, the baby did a backflip out of the doctor’s arms and landed on its feet a yard or so away. He was about two feet tall, able-bodied, and deeply disturbing. He cracked his tiny knuckles. The doctor fainted.

I took another look at the representative and was able to discern nothing. I’d been hoping this particular moment in the game demo would elicit a reaction of some sort. A laugh, a snort of disgust, even a look of utter confusion would have been better than this impassivity.

A second doctor appeared, scooped up the syringe and pressed a giant red button on the wall with the word “emergency” embossed on it. Alarms went off and red lights flashed in the delivery room. All at once, the cinematic mode of the game shifted to active gameplay.

A black banner with yellow, glowing text appeared at the bottom of the screen:

Press B to disarm doctor

In the chair to my right, one of the animators, Avery, tapped on his controller, triggering the brawny baby to grab hold of the doctor’s wrist as he lunged, and subsequently

deliver a series of karate chops to his arm. The doctor crumpled. The baby retrieved the syringe and cocked back a veiny arm to deliver a coup de grâce.

“Please don’t!” screamed the doctor. The action momentarily froze, although the baby continued to breathe and sway in the pseudo-fugue state reserved for videogame characters. Another banner appeared at the bottom of the screen with the following text:

1. Okay. I won’t kill you. Get out of my sight and
 tell no one of this.
2. Why should I show you the mercy you denied me?

Avery toggled the controller’s thumbstick, alternating which of the two lines of text was highlighted.

“What do you think, guys? How bad do we want Jaden to be?” he said. He glanced around the room.

“Up to you, Avery,” said the other animator, Jackson, knowing exactly what would happen next. Avery smiled impishly and selected the bottom line of text.

“Goo goo gah gah,” the baby said ominously, and we watched as he stabbed the syringe into the doctor’s chin. Using the momentum from this blow, the newborn hurled the body out of a nearby window.

“You monster!” yelled Jaden’s mother, who had been watching in horror. Another black banner with text:

New Mission: Escape Hospital

Avery navigated Jaden into the hallway and was ambushed by a squadron of doctors holding M16 assault rifles. Jaden had just begun to dodge their bullets when Avery paused the game.

“This is where you wanted me to stop, right?” He looked at Noah, the head designer. Noah nodded, and turned to the representative, Jonathan Gust, who had agreed to come in

to our headquarters and look at our game. Gust worked for a large gaming corp called Ubiware, which had a history of discovering and backing small indie videogames. He'd said very little since coming in.

"After this the graphics get a little shoddy. Plus, you only wanted to see the first couple minutes of gameplay, right?" Noah said, deferentially. Gust nodded. We all waited. Watching the game demo alongside Gust felt a bit like how I imagine an actor feels when she's aware that a distinguished casting director sits in the audience.

"That was incredibly strange," Gust finally said. Jackson shot me a disheartened look. Gust cleared his throat and went on. "And I loved it."

"Yes!" yelled Noah, unable to resist punching the air.

"It's imaginative, it's bizarre in all the right ways, and it's funny. This is exactly the kind of shake-up the game industry needs right now. And the ideas you have for where it's headed are brilliant."

"Yes yes yes!" said Noah. "That's exactly what I said."

"I have a battalion of questions, of course," Gust said.

"Of course," said Noah.

"But first and foremost I'm curious to know what the inspiration was for this level. Which one of you is the mastermind?"

Noah, Avery, and Jackson all looked my way. Gust's attention swept over me warmly, paternally.

"You're the writer."

"Lit major." I said, trying to play down the whole situation.

"Logical." He tucked his iPad in his bag. "So tell me— what was going through your head when you wrote this?" I smiled uneasily.

“I’m not sure where to start,” I said.

“No need to play humble,” said Gust. The truth was I couldn’t supply the information he wanted. No one in the room, including myself, had any means of answering his question. But let me back up a little.

Elias 2

In the summer after I graduated from college, I began to write in my sleep. At the time, I was working with a number of friends to develop the Beta for a video game we'd conceived of during our junior year at Columbia University. The game was called Gridiron Ghoul and, as is the case with many projects generated during those strange and formative years, the concept came long before its realization.

The inspiration for GG had arrived when, one smoke-break and two or three drinking games into a party we'd been hosting, my suitemate, Noah, had made a joke. Embittered by a narrow loss in flip-cup to a pair of muscly freshman, he'd removed himself from the hub of the party and taken a seat on the couch to watch our friend, Jackson, play the last quarter of a match in the XBOX football game, Madden NFL 13 (Jackson was not very social and had consented to come to this party on the condition that a gaming system be set up and at his disposal). At the time, Noah and I were fairly close, so within a couple minutes of his having sat down, I joined him to watch the game. We watched for a while, decreasingly aware of the party around us, increasingly invested in the groups of pixels wandering around the screen. There came a point when the tiny digital ref stopped the action of the game three times in quick succession, and the gameplay halted as we were forced to watch the diminutive pinstriped figure whistle furiously. The third time it happened, the in-question footballer looked visibly irritated –an emotional detail the group of observers was all impressed with– and which inspired Noah to say: “What if a prompt appeared right now, like, ‘Press A to make football player punch ref?’”

Like many sports games, the action of Madden NFL is limited to the field of play. There is nothing beyond the limits of the stadium besides the inaccessible void of unused

cyber space. This is in harsh contrast to the vast and sprawling maps of the aptly named “open-world” or “sandbox” games, which allow gamers to explore nations, cross seas, evolve into divine dragon slayers, attend interstellar banquets, and generally be way cooler than they are in real life. In Madden, such escapism has its limits: you’re either a football player on the field, or you’re shutting down the game system and clearing snack debris from you’re pants, puzzling over your surroundings like the Hulk waking up from a rampage. Unsportsmanlike, and generally anomalous actions like ref punching are usually inconsistent with clean-cut sports games like Madden, so by asking the question he did, Noah sent our minds reeling.

“That’d be kind of funny, right?” he said, egged on by the laughs his comment had elicited. “If the ref makes a call against one dude too many times in a row, you have the option to punch him.”

“That’s good, man,” said Jackson, cracking his knuckles. “Then, like, you get to have a full-on battle with the ref in the middle of the game.”

“Hold down A to break ref’s arm,” said our friend Avery, in a deep, faux-video-game voice. “Combo! Combo! K.O.” We laughed.

“I got next on the table, bro! I already called it,” someone yelled from the other room. I took a swig of beer and watched the screen, thoughtfully.

“What if it doesn’t stop there?” I said.

“What do you mean?” said Noah

“What if fighting off the ref is just the first level?”

“You mean like, you, as the football player, get to go on various missions?” said Jackson.

“Yeah, that’s good, Eli,” said Noah, nodding my way. “Like you have to fight off a bunch of refs, but then it turns out the refs were actually terrorists or something...”

“And you have to fight your way out of the field,” I said. “And leave the stadium, and uncover this terrorist plot.”

I heard the sound of a stack of cups falling to the floor in the living room.

“Fuck!” someone yelled.

“So it becomes, like, an open-world-game out of nowhere?” said Jackson.

“Exactly. Like, you, the football player, were actually with the FBI the whole time, you were like, uh, a sleeper agent.”

“And you were just activated,” said Noah. “But all of that only happens if you punch that ref the first time. If you let the prompt slide– that’s it. You just keep playing a sports game like regular.”

“Hell yeah, that’s good,” said Jackson, pausing his game.

“But you market the game just like a regular sports-game,” said Avery. “You don’t tell anyone they’re gonna’ have the option of turning it into an open-world. But then one person clicks the prompt and finds out and tells someone–”

“And you break the Internet,” said Noah.

By 2 A.M. that night, the house was in ruins and we had a month-long plan. Jackson would lead an animation team, Avery would put together the flowcharts for the decision-making aspects of the individual levels, I would write the game’s story, and Noah would spearhead the team and do finances (his father was a successful litigator, and had promptly agreed to provide startup funds).

During the subsequent two years, not one of these plans reached fruition.

A couple weeks passed without any sort of follow-up. Then each of us began to feel embarrassed about our respective nonfulfillment of our duties. Another meeting was never called, and discussion of the project was tactfully evaded. The idea eventually faded from our memory. We all had classes, and girls, and extracurricular activities to attend to.

It wasn't until the first month after our graduation that Noah gave me a call to say the game was back on. Why now? I wondered. He said it was because he'd pitched the idea to Ubiware, a game developer based in Canada, and a representative had voiced interest. I knew that wasn't the whole truth. It was because he was looking down the barrel of the Bar Exam, and realizing he had no interest at all in becoming a lawyer. He wanted to explore other options. Like all of us, he was scared.

I might've been deterred by the note of desperation in his voice when I picked up the phone had I myself not been so disconsolate. My girlfriend, Emma, and I had just broken up, and as a result, I was unintentionally living alone in the Poconos, a location I never something I saw myself living in, intentionally or otherwise.

In the months leading up to graduation, Emma and I mapped out a plan to live together in the city, where she'd found work as a nurse (like Noah, she had legacy on her side), and I'd found the possibility of work as a freelance journalist. Despite the uncomfortable knowledge that I was the less stable part of the duo, it had seemed like a solid plan. I loved her, after all. I envisioned plenty of futures for myself and she appeared in each of them. Saying yes to her, and to her various desires and hopes felt like easiest thing in the world.

So when she asked me if, in addition to an apartment in New York, I would be up for buying an old cabin off of her parents, it immediately seemed like a smart, logical, and exciting thing to do. They had been planning on selling it anyway, and Pennsylvania was only

a couple hour drive from the city. The house was a red and decrepit A-frame they'd purchased before their success in the field of medicine had sent them skyrocketing out the realm of acceptable decrepit A-frame ownership, a relic of a humbler era. It had nostalgic value for her, since she'd spent childhood summers visiting it. And her parents were, of course, willing to hand it off for next to nothing.

We purchased the cabin, spent a couple of weeks relaxing there, and were closing in on apartments in the city when she woke up from a midday nap in June and announced that she'd had a dream which demanded that she go to Europe. I thought she was joking at first—this being one of the most down-to-earth girls I'd ever known. (One of the only arguments she and Noah's ex, Rayanna, had ever had was caused by Rayanna's insistence on the value of Tarot Cards. They'd never really resolved it, although they'd remained close up until Rayanna had faded out of the picture and rejoined a sect). I told Emma to go back to sleep, and to quit messing with me. But as the weeks went by, she held fast to the legitimacy of this premonition. I found her browsing plane tickets late at night, heard her practicing her French in the bathroom, and discovered that she'd uncharacteristically failed to follow up on the New York apartment we'd been eyeing. Finally I confronted her when we were standing on the doormat of the cabin, on our way back from picking up groceries, and said if she was serious about going to Europe then I was going to go with her.

“Eli, you can't come.”

“What?”

I'd been formulating the declaration in my head for the past few days, and yet made no preparation for such a categorical shutdown.

“You can’t.” she repeated. “You’re not allowed to come with me. That was what they said in the dream. I’ve been meaning to tell you, but I didn’t know how to say it. Honestly I was scared.”

“Emma why are you doing this? Who said that in the dream?”

“I know it sounds crazy but this is what I have to do, I’ve never known anything to be truer.”

“Stop talking like that! You sound like you’re in a film noir.”

“I’m sorry, I’m dragging it out, aren’t I?”

“No, that’s not the problem!” I dropped the bag I was holding, sending groceries spilling out onto the ground. She backed away in momentary fear. My tone of voice had been too much— I’d pushed the conversation into the realm of Argument. It wasn’t okay.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying to convey with my voice that I was calm now, rational. “But it’s frustrating when it feels like...” I scoured my mind for what it felt like, struggling to think of anything beyond the internal feedback loop of *like you’re acting fucking crazy*. I tried to coax myself into that levelheaded, ‘I-statement’-oriented mode of dialogue that we’d honed as a couple. I met with moderate success. “I feel like you won’t just tell me that the differences in our personalities have gotten to be too much. If you don’t want to live in New York with some starving artist at your side, I get it. The last thing I want is to... to be a hindrance. But just *tell* me that. You don’t have to feed me some bullshit about dream premonitions.” There was a long silence while she rubbed her eyes. Some fireflies drifted idly between us. “What do you even plan on doing in Europe?”

She started to form a sentence but then gave up and cried. Then I cried. She apologized profusely but said it had to be this way. She added that it was better we saw each other as little as possible before she left.

She spent the following week crashing on the couch, indifferent to my protests. I was still in shock when she climbed into her cab to the airport.

“Good luck. Take care of the cabin” was all she said, before letting the screen door shut behind her. One of the few sentiments I’d gotten out of her was the wish that I have the house as penance, as a place to hole up when I needed to escape from the city. I had no intention of staying in my ex’s childhood haunt while I recovered from our breakup. That’s not the way I wanted to start my life as a real person. But it was undoubtedly a good place to get some thinking done, and a cheap place at that— so it’s where I decided to spend my first summer as a non-student, just while I got on my feet, considered my options. It’s also where Noah found me when he called about resuscitating Gridiron Ghoul.

“That’s uh... kind of an awkward place to be, isn’t it?” said Noah.

“Yeah, Noah. I’m aware.”

“All her childhood toys up there in the attic, her little crayon scribbles all over the furniture.”

“Yup.”

“All those nooks and crannies where she played with her imaginary friends.”

“Right.”

“I bet pretty much every inch of that house reminds you of her. Her presence drifting wistfully through every corridor...”

“Thank you, Noah.” I said. “I hadn’t quite thought of that.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I was just thinking of how weird that’d be for me. Not trying to be insensitive or anything. But... I mean, of course you’ve thought that through— you’re always thinking.” There was a pause. The cabin’s plumbing gurgled lazily. “Anyway, what about your pop? Why not stay with him in the city? He gonna’ charge you an arm and a leg?”

“No, actually he offered to put me up for free for the summer. But I promised myself I wouldn’t. Not after how much trouble I was in high school.”

“What, with the sleepwalking?”

“Mostly that, yeah.”

“It came back then?”

“Well, what with the uh...” I hesitated. The habit had vanished for most of college, but since the breakup I had relapsed harder than ever.

“I figured.”

“It’s when I get stressed. I went to my old doctor and he said he’s gonna’ put me on the updated version of the meds I used to have. That should do the trick. But still, I don’t wanna’ take any chances with my Dad’s place. He’s done his time.”

“Yeah.”

“Plus, in general, I’d just rather not go back to the nest. Too many friends have said it’s sort of a toxic atmosphere.”

“Like Venus,” he said. He cleared his throat. “You’re sure you’re up for this, though? Sure you’re, uh, willing to drive down for meetings every Friday afternoon? The meetings should run from 1 to 5ish, just a weekly check-in kinda’ thing.”

“Yes. Definitely. Actually I could really use the stability, the regular routine and so on.”

“Okay. That’s great, man. Really happy to have you onboard. If you could have an idea of the first three or four levels by our first meeting, that’d be ideal, but no sweat.”

During the weeks leading up to the meeting I did a great deal of sweating, actually, both because Pennsylvania summer was scalding in a bright, expansive way that I’d had no

preparation for, and because I had a lot of trouble writing— or, at least, a lot of trouble writing what I was supposed to be writing.

In those first few weeks, attempts at revisiting my original notes on Gridiron Ghoul more often than not ended up being “free writes,” which more often than not ended up being about Emma. And yet I had no desire to really seriously sit down and write about her, or about “us,” no instinct to create that quintessential “breakup piece,” which feels almost mandatory in the wake of getting one’s artistically-inclined heart broken. What would I even say? We’d been just fine up until she’d transformed into a soul-searching cliché, so what was I supposed to feel bad about? Blame myself for? What should I have done differently? I let these thoughts nip gingerly at the fringes of my consciousness, but never gave them my full attention. Perhaps my reluctance to address, in writing, exactly what would’ve been most productive for me to address was what brought about my writer’s block. I can’t say for sure.

The night before our first post-grad Gridiron Ghoul meeting, I was sitting on the living room couch. And by living room, I simply mean the portion of the ground floor without a refrigerator or bed in it. The cabin lacked any sort of room divisions beyond the bathroom door, and the ceiling, which separated the first floor from the sparsely furnished, triangular alcove accessible only by pull-down ladder (I guess if you were a realtor you’d refer to this area as “the second floor,” and according to Emma that’s how her family had used it, but even my urban brain sensed that the line between attic and “floor” was being fudged). I had my laptop open, and I was procrastinating rigorously. Upon receiving a text from Noah earlier that night, which read: “Can’t wait to see you tomorrow, buddy! Lookin’ forward to those pages,” I’d hurriedly opened up a Word document and written my name and the date. Two hours had passed since then. In that time, I’d written and promptly deleted three sentences, and spent the rest of the time at the mercy of click-bait.

The whole mission had begun nobly enough with 1. A perfectly adult urge to check my Email, followed by 2. An arguably less adult urge to scroll down my Facebook feed until I found an attractive person's new profile picture to admire, a task which was interrupted by a detour to 3. Two articles titled, respectively "The ACTUAL science behind the butterfly effect," and "17 Books that Will Smith's children recommend" before I was thrown even further afield by 4. A sidebar on the article advertising Miley Cyrus' published novel (though I paused briefly, I couldn't help clicking it out of some 'this oughta be good' type of intrigue), the investigation of which led me (at this point, rather deliriously) to the viewing of 5. A video of Miley Cyrus' twerk brigade (the proverbial car crash you can't look away from)— which is the last thing I can remember doing before 6. Being jolted out of my reverie by my cat's hungry meows, with the horrifying realization that two hours had passed and I'd just been 7. Perusing Worldstar.com with a twitchy left eye.

"What the fuck am I doing?" I said, and slapped my laptop lid down. I looked over at my cat, Toledo. He meowed tersely, as if to say:

"Not feeding me, pal, that's what you're doing."

"Sorry, little guy. Lost track of time." I filled his bowl and, in an attempt to clear my head, began washing some of the dishes I'd let stack up during the past weeks. I absently let my hands scrub, rinse, and dry, while my attention drifted through the square window on the front door, and into the rural darkness. I knew, from daytime experience, that there was a line of trees ten yards away, but I could not discern their shapes. How must've Emma felt gazing out this window as a child? I wondered. Was she scared? Or did she become jaded to it at a young age, comforted by it? Perhaps for her the darkness was friendly— like that extra comforter a caring parent drapes over their already sleeping child, sensed by the dreamer on a subliminal level, appreciated only with the smallest of vacant smiles.

When I was young, and struggling to fall asleep, I'd always consoled myself with the thought that horror movies never took place in apartment buildings. I'd felt safe snuggled up on the 16th floor, knowing that the knife-murderer, ghoul, or bipedal mega-shark wreaking havoc in the countryside lacked the stamina to ascend the stairs to my bedroom, and furthermore that this monster was aware that riding the elevator up to kill me entailed fundamentally non-horror-villain actions like pressing "Up" buttons, waiting, and listening to soft muzak. At the time, I felt invincible.

It was hard to recall that feeling now, away from civilization, alone, with the sink empty, and my writing no closer to finished than when I'd first set out. I felt all the more annoyed with this paralysis because it seemed utterly counterproductive to the mission I was realizing, more and more, was at the crux of my having consented to work on Gridiron Ghoul: I wanted to create something worthy of attention. More than that, I wanted to create something so magnificent that it'd force Emma to reconsider her decision.

Rayanna 1

My father's death might seem like a disaster to some, but not to me. He told me exactly how it would happen, how it would be received, how I would benefit from it. I felt unworried as he ushered us to the place he would die. In fact, what I experienced was something like nervous excitement in the face of his ascent. And in the months and years that followed, that was just what I came to think of it as: the day my father Ascended.

"Just up ahead," he said, taking a detour off of the main path. The woods were dense here, and the animals were calm. We marched behind him, twenty-five of us savoring the summer air. Most of the group had no idea what was about to happen. This was by design.

"Beautiful day for a hike," said Archie, from just behind me. "I've been telling Ron we should come out here for years."

"Seems like he finally listened," I told him. We walked along the new, narrower path for thirty more yards, our feet soundless against a squishy layer of damp moss. No wind could get to us, so there was nothing to conceal the throat clearing, swishing of clothing, and other usual sounds of humans in motion. We arrived at a clearing encircled by bluish grey stones. A jar of peanut butter swung from a branch. It smelled strongly. It made my mouth water.

"Make a circle," said my father. And we did so. "Get comfortable," he said, prompting us to sit. "You might be wondering why we seem to be taking a break today. We never take breaks, after all." A couple of people laughed. My father sat down on a stump and dug his toe into the moss, thinking. "The truth is this isn't a break. We don't take vacations because it's not work we're doing. It's completing the divine mission. And there is no break from that." Archie nodded in agreement. So did many others.

“Raye.” He said, looking at me and tilting his head toward the string dangling from the branch. I withdrew a fresh jar of peanut butter from my backpack and went to work replacing the old jar. The frayed hairs of the rope pricked, and pressed sharply into the heel of my palm as I pulled at the knot, but I tried not to show my discomfort. Standing beside my father, I felt the eyes of the group on my back. I knew I had to look as calm and competent as he did. I listened attentively as my hands fidgeted.

“For too long now, I’ve thought our goal was just out of reach. I’ve had you practice Empathetic Interplay on the pretense that you were on the cusp of transcendence. But now I know that there is more to be done.

His jacket rustled as he removed it. It slid to the side of the stump like a dead snake.

“When I had my dream all those years ago, before the Empathy Project came into existence, what was I told? Agnes, what did the Omni tell me?” Agnes responded almost before he was done speaking:

“Find Hive Mind! Reject self-obsession! Espouse empathy!”

“Good. That’s very good, Agnes.” I glanced over in time to see Agnes’ wrinkled face reddening in pride.

“And for all this time I’ve told you this was a simple mission. Streamlined. You need but plunge your body into the river of empathy, and feel its coolness. Let it cleanse you of your narrow perceptions. Let the current do the work for you.” He stood and examined my new knot, patted me on the back. That would do. I returned to the patch of ground near Archie. “Focus on the other, and you will save yourself. That has always seemed enough.” He paused, looked around. “But how many of you have reached Hive Mind?” No one spoke. “I relish the truth in this silence. None! No one has reached Hive Mind yet! I know you all know this, sense it— sometimes you may even worry about it. Is this your fault? No,

of course not! You have been empathizing with each other for years, and yet none of you have fulfilled your wish. Did the Omni lie to me then? Never! They have merely been saving the next phase of your mission for the day that you're ready. And today is that day. I had a dream just two nights ago. The Omni visited me again."

"What did they say?" screamed Agnes, unable to restrain herself. Several other Empathizers shushed her and grabbed shoulders, though they were clearly just as excited. "Sorry," she added.

"That's alright, Agnes. This is a cause for elation— there's no doubting that. I will tell you part of what they told me. It's not up to me to tell you everything." There was a disturbance in foliage near the peanut butter. My father froze and watched it intently. When nothing happened, he went on: "What I can tell you is that I will reach Hive Mind today."

A cheer rose up in the clearing. We clapped until he raised a hand to stop us.

"What might sadden you to hear is that you are not ready to join me. But you must understand: you need more time. I've worked out a deal with the Great Ones to get you that time. This is for your own good."

"How will you lead us from the other side?" said Archie.

"There will be another."

"Another leader?" asked Archie. Ron said he would not hear any more questions.

"Within the day it will be time for me to go. Now wait with me and experience me for the last time as a mortal." And so we waited, the Empathizers barely breathing in the fresh morning air. Only my father and I knew what was coming.

Elias 3

When I awoke, I was lying on top of the kitchen counter, and I was confused, although perhaps not for the expected reasons. My middle and high school days had been marked by various parasomnias –sleep-walking, night terrors, narcolepsy, excessive drooling– pretty much all the disorders that complicate, and eventually disqualify you from, slumber parties. To awake in unconventional locations, then, was nothing new for me. But in all the years of this happening, I'd always found some sort of external verification of my nocturnal activity: a shelf of books strewn across the floor, a bowl of haphazardly poured cereal, a pair of boots placed in the freezer, and so on. I'd become so adjusted to these small casualties that I'd early on formed the habit of setting my alarm clock for half an hour early, in case I needed time to clean up. This time, the house was inexplicably tidy.

I should clarify: It was not any tidier than I had left it. In fact, it was in the exact same state as when I'd grappled with writer's block the previous night (an above-average level of cleanliness for a bachelor pad, though hardly immaculate. Think of it this way: were the archetypical mom to come strolling through the cabin, she'd likely rate it a "pigpen," rather than say, "ground zero" or "the sight of a hurricane"). I confirmed that nothing had changed around the house by checking all the cupboards, groping between the couch cushions, running outside to inspect the dilapidated roof, opening up the oven, ascending the pull-down ladder to the second floor/attic of the cabin, poking my head up the chimney, and basically stomping around the house in a strange, backwards parody of someone who's just lost their car keys. As I searched, I was several times the victim of my own spatial unawareness: underestimating the width of a doorway here, clanging my forehead against a cupboard there. The whole ordeal was very annoying, the sort that fills one's head with a

litany of useless, parental adages like “slow down there, sport,” and “woke up on the wrong side of the bed.” By the time I gave up on my search the stove clock read 10:17.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I sang under my breath, staring hard at those glowing red numbers. I realized I had less than three hours until the Gridiron Ghoul meeting was set to start, two of which I’d have to spend driving into the city. I had nothing to present, no outlines for levels in the game, not even a name for the main character. Was it even worth it showing up there? I asked myself. Even as my body began to soldier on, washing its face, dressing itself in a button-down and some jeans, fixing itself a breakfast sandwich, my mind set off down a divergent path of planning out Emails that’d excuse my absence. I discarded stomach bug and pinkeye as viable excuses, and was about to settle on family emergency when the bacon I’d been distractedly cooking set the fire alarm off, scaring Toledo into a yowling frenzy around the house, the finale of which was a lamp crashing to the floor, my burning myself on the pan, and the cat digging his claws viciously into my calves.

“Why?” I screamed. I shook my leg vigorously but he held fast. “Get off me, you dumb cat!” I finally succeeded in detaching his talons from my pant-leg. He saw me cocking back an arm to throw an egg at him and quickly scurried beneath the sofa. I hurled the carton at the place he’d just disappeared. “Who just wakes up one day and goes to Europe?” I yelled. A couple minutes of panicked magazine waving coaxed the fire alarm back into silence, and a gently applied ice-cube gave my blistering finger some relief. But as I coughed from the smoke and massaged my calves, I felt the damage was done. The fate of the day was sealed. There was a knock at the door.

“Everything ok in there, son?” a voice said. I took a couple of deep breaths and opened the door to see my next-door neighbor. He was a thick, clean-shaven man with war-veteran certainty about him. “I heard your fire alarm go off, and some yelling.”

“Yeah, yeah everything’s fine,” I told him. “Just burned some bacon is all.”

“You sure?” He stooped to pick up a paper Toledo must’ve sent scattering in his rampage. He examined the rest of the house, which was now definitively in the realm of “hurricane zone.” “Sounded awfully dire for just some burned bacon.” He handed me the paper.

“Yeah, no.” I forced a smile. “First day of work, so I’m just tearing around. Moving fast.” He looked at me hard. I glanced down at the paper he’d handed me.

“You still live with that girl?”

“No. She moved out.”

“Where’d she go?”

“Europe.”

“Europe? Why?”

“What?” I said. I’d quickly become absorbed in the writing on the paper.

“Why’d she go to Europe for?”

“She had a dream.”

“What?”

“She— never mind. We broke up.”

“Well that’s a shame,” he said, his eyes narrowing. “My wife and I liked the girl. She really knew the neighborhood. Real smart girl.”

“Yeah she grew up here.” He looked me over, hard. He seemed slightly displeased with what he saw. I felt a strong urge to check if my fly was down.

“You sure there’s nothing I can help you with?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m happy,” I said.

“Sometimes my wife—”

“I’m sorry to be curt but I’ve actually got a work-day to get ready for.” He seemed as if he might protest, then nodded gruffly and let the screen-door shut in front of him.

“You have a good first day at work, then,” he said through the screen.

“You too,” I said distractedly. I closed the wooden door, devoting my full attention to the piece of paper in my hands. I read it through several times without understanding. I played out the previous night in my head in an attempt to provide an explanation for what I was looking at, but the memories I had leading up to sleep were all tinged with the film of exhaustion, and I struggled to place them on a time-line. All I saw were flashes of Miley Cyrus. I felt a dull ache in my temple.

I raised my eyes and caught sight of another paper at my feet, also lined with unfamiliar text. Then another. As when one catches sight of a singular ant and, with a few seconds of refocusing, discovers one is actually surrounded by a thriving metropolis of small formic bodies, I suddenly saw the floor was covered in papers. The anthill: a pile sitting atop the printer. I’d failed to inspect this pile during my harried search only because it was exactly where a stack of blank printer paper had sat the night before. But these papers were far from blank. After a couple moments of rifling, I arrived at the title page. It read:

Gridiron Ghoul:

A synopsis of its first five levels &
A proposed outline for the complete game.

By Elias Wallace

Rayanna 2

The bear appeared from behind us, using the same trail that we'd taken. It was almost as if he'd meant to come with our group, but gotten left behind.

"Finally," said my father.

Many of the Empathizers lost their nerve and stood up to put distance between themselves and the animal. I'll admit I was one of them. We huddled together on the opposite side of the clearing and watched him lumber towards us, grunting softly. He was shimmery black and powerfully built. He had no battle scars. He might've never seen humans before.

My father regarded him coolly, not moving from his position beside the hanging jar. He told us: "For me, reaching my goal means being able to connect with an animal as much as a man. This bear is my portal. For you it will be different. Do not try to do as I do." The bear arrived at the jar and its snout twitched in curiosity. It raised itself up on its hind-paws and began snapping at the jar. A falcon shrieked overhead, and I jolted in shock at the sound. Someone helped steady me. I had not realized I was holding my breath.

"Listen, bear." said my father, in a strong, loud voice. "You and I are quite different. And yet not so different. We share 85% of the same genetic information. Our ancestors were the same amoeba." My father edged closer and spread out his arms for an embrace. "It's time we both reconnect with the inner life that—"

The bear swatted a paw lazily at my father's head and he fell to the ground, blood appearing on his handsome face. He dabbed the pads of his fingers to the redness and then looked at them, confused. The bear returned to excavating his meal.

“You seem to have misunderstood me,” he told the bear. He stood, and assumed the stance he’d often use when an Empathizer was being disrespectful. “We will both reach that place that all creatures yearn for if you’ll permit me to imagine myself as you are now. For that to happen we need to create a physical connection.” The bear didn’t stir from its exploration of the jar. “Bear,” he said with force. His tone worried me. “Will you not listen, bear?” He snatched the jar from the bear’s snout and sent it swinging. And all of a sudden I was afraid. The animal roared and knocked him down with another swipe. This wasn’t right. The scene I’d prepared for was not matching up with the reality before me. This was too messy, too sudden. The blood didn’t trickle down my father’s cheek in a single heroic drop. It was spilling from his hairline and staining his shirt. “I love you, as I love all creatures,” he said, before the bear bit down on his shin. I heard bones snap. My father screamed. I almost ran forward. This *was* the plan, I reminded myself. Just because it wasn’t what I envisioned didn’t mean it wasn’t my father’s intention. Fear is a sign of weakness. I could not show weakness. If I did, who would trust me?

“Ron!” yelled Archie. I grabbed Ron’s hand to keep him from intervening.

“This is what he wants,” I assured Archie. My father wrapped his arms around the bear’s neck as it dug its teeth into his shoulder.

“I feel your hunger,” he said, in a weak voice. “I feel your fear. I understand you as a—” The bear dragged him out of the clearing. I lost sight of the pair within seconds. No one said anything for a long time.

Elias 4

“Eli, this is fucking brilliant,” said Noah, placing the script on the table.

“Ya did good, kid,” said Avery, swiveling in his chair. “I feel super underprepared now.” He laughed and Jackson joined him. I laughed too, because it seemed like the right, self-aggrandizing thing to do, and because I was genuinely happy to be around these guys again. In the month since we’d graduated, Noah had started dressing in expensive suits, Jackson had attempted to grow out a beard, and Avery had shaved the sides of his head— I wondered if, like their appearances, their personalities had minutely shifted with the commencement of nonacademic life. Had mine? There was an ease we found in each other’s company, which, I sensed, they had been missing too. Just being in a room with friends had gone from an everyday expectation to a rare treat, so I felt sort of giddy in their company, even if it’d only a few weeks since we’d parted ways, even if the room we now sat in happened to be a disconcerting one for someone with class sensibilities like my own.

The headquarters of Gridiron Ghoul, as it turned out, were just one of Noah’s father’s apartments in the vicinity Columbus Circle. To refer to it as “just an apartment,” however, is already giving the wrong impression. We were sitting around what I was sure was one of the most expensive tables I’d ever seen, in a room whose towering windows gave way to an picturesque view of central park and whose walls featured the work of eye-bulgingly renowned artists (including several genuine Warhols, which Noah dismissed as “just the little ones”). Finally there was the line of portraits featuring the male relatives in Noah’s family— an assemblage which my chair put me in the perfect position to view, and feel deeply disconcerted by, and which spread before the caption: “The successful men of the Rutherford Family.” The men in these pictures were very well fed, well dressed, and

grinning like only the men who control the world can grin. I'd always known Noah's roots, but something about the collegiate bubble had kept this knowledge in the realm of the abstract, and now it was unavoidably real. Rotating idly atop a chair that I imagined would look at home in a five-star hotel in outer space, I thanked the guys for their praise of the script.

"Any questions?" I said. I laughed at myself inwardly, at the confidence implied in this question. As if I'd be able to answer any question about the script; as if I hadn't spent the drive down racking my brains for a memory of writing it. After discovering that the mysterious stack contained the exact outline I'd been conscripted to write, I'd thrust the papers in my backpack and run to the car, generally confused but clear on the point that I now had what I needed for the meeting. Now that I'd heard it read aloud, the conclusion I'd settled on was that I'd written it just before passing out, and my memory had simply been clouded by tiredness.

"When do we get to see the rest of it?" said Avery, rubbing his hands together faux-maniacally.

"I think we should just appreciate what Eli's brought us for now," said Noah. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves— that's gonna' put too much pressure on him." He got up from his chair and placed his hands on the back of it. "I think you found it, Eli." He let the question of what "it" was linger in the air. He walked over to the window and gazed down at the loud traffic. "Jaden Chaos is just the protagonist we were looking for. And the game itself... I mean this is what we all wanted when we conceived of this thing— a game that lives up to its goal of breaking down the boundaries of conventional gaming, a game that does not sacrifice the soundness of its narrative for its ludonarrative, doesn't accept that a game can sell based on gameplay alone." The rest of us glanced at each other, eyebrows raised,

wondering how prepared this speech was. It was the first time we'd heard Noah speak so loftily about gaming. "Too many game designers are content to create a game with shit dialogue and great action sequences because they know it will still work; the standards for the quality of story are abysmal in this industry, so everyone feels okay letting writing take the backseat. No one's asking where game protagonists come from, what their origin stories are, why they are the way they are. This game changes that— we empathize with Jaden right away, but we see that he doesn't take himself too seriously, nor does the game. And that's another great thing! The humor in here is so refreshing, and weird! Humor may well be the next great bastion of the gaming industry. If you can keep this up, we've got something amazing on our hands."

"But no pressure though, right Eli?" said Avery, smiling. I smiled back uneasily, and pressed my palms into the smooth wood of the table.

"I've got us a meeting with a representative from Ubiware at the end of July," said Noah, coming over to where I sat. He rested an arm on my shoulder and I smelled the piney scent of his cologne, a different aroma than what I remembered him wearing. I briefly imagined him purchasing a glass vial called "success" or "modern warrior." It occurred to me that, along with the videogame research he'd evidently been doing, he might also have been educating himself on how to be a leader, might have spent time watching online lectures with names like "take charge of the room with your body language" and "5 habits of an alpha."

"Jackson, and Avery," he continued. "Can you guys get the first level of the game together by then? My Dad can get us a team to help out." Jackson said it would be no problem, and Avery held up an A-Okay sign. "Eli, just keep the good stuff coming," he told me. "Actually stick around afterward, would you?" I nodded.

He and the two animators debarked down a logistical course of thought which quickly lost my attention. So and so was going to part of Jackson's team, whatshername would be part of Avery's, these were the expectations, creating a demo would require X amount of financial support etc. I contemplated visiting my Dad before I returned to the Poconos. I hadn't notified him that I was in the city— would it just stress him out if I stopped by the shop? Would it make his day? He worked as a luthier in midtown, in a small, dusty store that had miraculously not gotten shut down, although the restaurants on either side of it looked as if they might engulf it any day. Foot-traffic was modest in the store, but the care with which he handled each of the customers meant that my visits often felt intrusive, often entailed my tinkering with ukuleles in the corner while he and the customer engaged in intimate, eye-contact heavy conversation over the benefits of nylon guitar strings. I suppose this intimacy is why his customers remained so loyal, why the shop was unaccountably still in existence, but it also meant he was regularly inaccessible. Once the store was open, he was all theirs. Then once the store was empty, he'd apologize to me profusely for not being more attentive, and seem genuinely less pleased with himself as a father figure, as much as I'd try to convince him I understood his methods. I decided to head back to the cabin; it wasn't worth the risk of adding to his stress.

I was stirred from my thoughts by the sounds of Jackson and Avery packing their backpacks and donning their jackets. I'd internalized these sounds as the signal that class was coming to a close— this theme of zippers zipping and papers shuffling was the final movement of the academic symphony, conducted, as it were, by the clock and the conclusive tone of the teacher's voice, or in this case, by the tone in Noah's voice.

“Alright, gentleman. I think we’ve got a lot to work with here.” He stood and wrapped his knuckles on the table. “Heads of animation, I’ll see you in a week.” Avery and Jackson finished packing and sidled their way to the door.

“See you later,” said Jackson.

“Peace,” added Avery, and they left, Noah closing the door behind them. He came over and sat down on the chair next to me. There was a short pause while I looked around the room, my gaze falling on the far side of central park.

“We’re really doin’ this, huh?” I said.

“Yeah, man. We’re really doing this. You’re not having doubts are you?”

“No, not at all,” I said.

“Good. We need you. You really set the tone today.”

“Thanks.”

“Honestly, Eli. I was worried. What with all that’s been goin’ on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just didn’t know if you’d be in the right place, emotion-wise to be able to commit to a project like this. I was trying to be optimistic by asking you. But, I mean, I know what it’s like. You remember how I was after Raye? I took that pretty hard.”

“You were a wreck,” I said.

“Exactly– no way would I have been able to commit to something like this after she left,” he said. “So I just wanted to see if you were in the same place or what. I mean it’s just our luck, right?” He cracked himself up a little. “We both end up with seemingly normal girls that do complete 180s and run off to crazytown.”

His comment was satisfying to hear, but it also made me slightly uncomfortable. Had I written Emma off as crazy yet? He continued, perhaps picking up on my ambivalence: “I’m

not saying Emma's on par with Raye. It's been years since Raye left, and Emma's only just started on this whole 'finding herself' kick. It's probably just a phase. She'll come back to you after a couple months saying she's sick of baguettes or whatever."

"Yeah."

"In the meantime, though, I really appreciate you bringing your A-game."

"Thanks."

"Next time we meet, can you bring a synopsis of the next few levels?" he said.

"You got it."

"Oh, and expect a check." He winked at me. "My Dad's made sure this organization has the means to support its executives."

Rayanna 3

My father had told me of his ascension in the same way he had given me most of my life lessons: serenely, directly, and while we were surrounded by nature.

I don't mean I was brought up like some wolf-girl, separate from the indoor life of humans. I spent plenty of time exploring the various rooms of Allway as a child. But for Ron, the easiest way to teach was through allegory to the most definite parts of the world—the mad dash of toad, the stillness of early morning, the rolling crunch of a docking boat.

“I'm going to wake up soon. But first I have to sleep.” is how he began his admission, rowing gently through Paupackan Lake in the half-light. I gazed over his shoulder at the line of woods trickling by, barely illuminated by the day's first sparks. He pointed at an abandoned bird's nest in a treetop and elaborated on his departure. He talked for a long time and at one point handed me an envelope. He said it would answer any questions I had once he was gone. I wanted to know if there was another way. But there wasn't, he said. I wanted to know how he could be so sure.

“The Omni don't make mistakes.”

“Maybe you made a mistake. You might've misinterpreted their message.”

“You know better than that, Raye. If it's what the Great Ones want, it's what we should want.”

“Is that what you're going to tell the group?”

“Yes,” he said. “They'll doubt me, unfortunately. At first, I mean.”

“They've never doubted you.”

“When a man endures a certain kind of fate, people start to wonder about the things he's told them. They distort their memories of the past to account for a present they can't

fathom. 'That's where you come into play.'" He smiled and sucked on the inside of his lip. I didn't fully understand him then, but his confidence assured me. It had always assured me as a child, after all. It had assured others as well, the torch for us to gather around.

I think if I had grown up alone with him, I would've grown to resent his self-assuredness, likely his whole being. To be a daughter and father alone together is no easy task. But we were lucky enough to have company. All I had to do, when I needed an escape from him, was to knock on one of the other doors in Allway, and there would be someone to talk to. My favorite childhood memories are of doing just this: running out of my room as soon as I woke and knocking on the door right across the hall. One of my Dad's old students, Archie, would emerge, ready to discuss the news and to ask my help with the crossword, never menacing, or patronizing, or creepy. Always treating me like a fellow adult, like a human being. If I ever became bored of our conversation, I would just run to the next room. There I'd find Sammy, the young engineer with gap-teeth, and her red-haired husband who I called Pitty Pat because of how fast he could type. They were willing to talk science with me. And how I loved to talk science. When talk wasn't enough, I'd venture out into the woods to collect newts with Olivia, the one other child in Allway that I got along with.

This was my life for a long time. That my mother found it disgraceful did not bother me— she'd left the group shortly after my third birthday. She did not matter to me. Just as it didn't matter to me the way people talked about us. A cult, a sect, a coven, an endless A.A. meeting— whatever people chose to call us was always irrelevant. I'd thought hard about this.

Someone looking to point out the faults in my upbringing might point to the absence of other children. Isn't that supposed to damage a child? Doom them to emotional decay? I've encountered this idea many times. But I never felt like I was missing something. With the exception of Olivia, I found most other children boring. When I told them my ideas,

they would simply stare at me blankly and then start blabbing about their new toy. How it was yellow, how it was fast, how it was special. I didn't care about these things; I wanted to speak and to learn about the world from people who had been here longer than me.

Now they were standing in front of me in a bloodied clearing, afraid. And it was my job to make them understand.

"Do not be frightened," I told them all. I wondered if they could see that I was trembling. "You have borne witness to the awesome power of transcendence. The Omni have taken my father to Hive Mind." They looked at me. They looked at one another, clearly shaken.

"Do not be frightened." I said again. I believed myself a little bit more. I tried not to look at the bloodstain on the moss. "Our path is shorter and easier now. We may attain Hive Mind without undue effort."

"What do *you* mean by Hive Mind?" said Agnes, with tears in her eyes. I was grateful for another voice. "Because I never thought it would be like that." She indicated the gap in the bushes where my father had been dragged.

"You misunderstand," I told her. "You don't have to do what he just did. No one does." I thought back to my conversation with my father on the boat— to what he'd told me to say. "That's just one way to achieve our goal. That was my father's way. But he knew it wasn't the easiest or most painless." I swallowed hard. "He knew we weren't ready for it." The words were coming from my mouth and organizing themselves into strong, clear sentences. I was even surprising myself.

"He's made arrangements for us to carry on our own path. Without him."

"And in his absence, who will lead us?" asked someone.

"Me," I said. "My father asked that I take over in his place."

“You?” said the same person. And as the voice continued to speak I located its source: Edgar. He was one of the Empathizers who’d been with the group for the longest. He was intelligent, well respected, and trusted by my father. He was also one of the few Empathizers I did not like. “Ron asked you to be in charge?”

“Yes.” I said. There was a weighty pause.

“That seems a little unwise. You’re younger than almost all of us.” This was a slight exaggeration— at 26 I was about the median age of the group.

“You perceive me as younger than I am,” I told him. Edgar

“That may be true, but can you honestly say you’re ready?” Edgar glanced around at the rest of the group. I could tell he was holding back from rejecting me outright. He wanted support before he went further. He was afraid of looking too combative. “You left us after all. Don’t you think it’s best that someone leads us who’s been here the whole time?”

“My mother forced me to leave,” I told him, my stomach growing warm with anger. “You know that. Don’t act like you forgot. And don’t act like you forgot I came back on my own.”

“Yes, after six years,” said Edgar, with a smirk.

“And I came back,” I repeated, unable to think of anything else to say.

“So tell us—why didn’t Ron just tell us he was leaving you in charge before he left?”

“Leave her alone, Edgar,” said Archie.

“Because he wanted to test your faith,” I said. “He said if you were true believers you’d trust me through him.”

“That’s very convenient thing for him to say to you. Are you sure you’re not remembering what you want to remember?” Edgar’s words incensed me. His patronizing

tone sent my mind whirling. I wondered how hard would it be to send his top-heavy frame tumbling to the ground.

“Edgar!” said Agnes. “Let’s just talk about this some other time. Ron would want us to take time and process the feelings we’re having right now.” Edgar tapped his fingers against his thigh in agitation. He held his tongue.

“Yes,” I agreed. “Today is a big day for the Empathy Project.” The Empathizers nodded. Many of their faces were still pale. “Let’s go back to Allway. We’ll talk over lunch.” They began gathering at the mouth of the clearing. Unless it was just my imagination, they kept their heads inclined toward me as they lined up. Perhaps this was a subtle sign of deference. I realized they were waiting for me to lead them out of the clearing, and I felt another wave of satisfaction. I said a silent farewell to my father, and led the group back down the path.

Elias 5

With the support of the Rutherford family in mind, I stopped at an electronics store on my way back up to the cabin and bought several top-of-the-line digital cameras. I did so without a shred of financial doubt (no, Noah hadn't told me an exact figure for the check I would be receiving but, honestly, did he need to?) This sensation was so foreign to me that I kept thinking one of the employees was going to walk up and slap the device out of my hand, reminding me that I still had a mountain of student loans to pay off and what the fuck did I think I was doing? The purchase was part of a plan that I'd been subconsciously formulating since I'd left the headquarters for Gridiron Ghoul. It'd been a suggestion from an imaginary Emma that'd finally convinced me to go ahead with my plan. While part of me sensed it was a fundamentally Bad Idea to continue using the memory of my ex as a sort of mental-processing software (a more adult incarnation of an imaginary friend, in other words)—the rest of me felt very comforted by the sound of her voice, imagined or not. At the beginning of my trip home, I'd asked her what she thought of the mysterious, nocturnal production of the videogame script.

“I thought you decided that you wrote it just before going to sleep?” she said.

“I mean that was my working theory... but I was thinking about it and that doesn't really make sense. I wrote something like 50 pages.

“Seems like there's something more going on.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. What if you recreated the whole scenario?”

“You mean, like, go through the exact same routine I went through last night?”

“Yes.”

“And observed more closely?”

“I think that’s how you’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

And I really did want to get to the bottom of this. Both because it was intrinsically mysterious, and because its intrinsic mysteriousness was preventing me from just sitting back and enjoying the fact that I had finally written something. I’m not saying I felt any keen desire to rest on my laurels, but it would’ve been nice to know whether they were my laurels to rest on in the first place. So I bought some cameras.

When I got home, I began to place them around the cabin. As I unpackaged them and experimented with their nighttime settings, I tried to avoid thinking about what exactly I was trying to achieve. By shunning serious contemplation of my hypothesis, I eluded the conclusion it would’ve been all too easy to ascertain: that the whole project was preposterous. Within this intentional tunnel vision, I felt a bit like an overzealous child who has taken to duct-taping screwdrivers together in a vague attempt at “inventing” something, blissfully unaware of my endgame, tenaciously engaged in the process. Unlike the young inventor, I had no fussy mother to call me from my bedroom and tell me it was time for dinner. I alone was responsible for wrenching myself from my experiment, cooking and eating my dinner in silence, dropping some pork to the floor for Toledo in an act of penance for my earlier abuse.

What was convenient about my experiment was that, once I pressed the record button on the cameras, all I had to do was what came naturally. There in lied the beauty of recreating a routine. Sure, not every aspect of the routine was enjoyable. Confronting a stack of dirty dishes was necessary, for instance. But that was hardly a rigorous requirement, and what’s more, it meant that I felt satisfied with myself as I let my dinner cutlery stack up in the sink. By letting these dishes amass, I was doing my job. I was being a good scientist. My

satisfaction persisted as I sprawled out on the couch in my best impression of my position from the previous night, pushing the base of my laptop toward me legs so that it rested against my belt-buckle. By the time I'd logged into my Facebook account and begun scrolling downward, it had become a more precise feeling: it was that sensation of the coinciding of an activity I really enjoyed with a motive that felt fundamentally Right. What I was doing felt positive and beneficial to my economic, and psychological wellbeing— the type of action that my Dad would admire, that abided by some greater law of goodness in the universe; I felt correct on a cosmic level as I watched a video of puppies piling on top of each other. With the last traces of daylight removed from the sky, the computer screen alone lit the interior of the cabin. The house seemed to stretch no further than the limits of that bluish luminescence, and it seemed like the world too ended there. Hours of aimless web surfing ensued; I washed dishes. I slept.

* * *

Typically, after whiling away a night like this, I'm afforded only a few moments of blissful oblivion before regret and shame lay their slimy hands upon me. "What a waste!" the parentally disappointed part of my mind will say, when I wake. "Think of all you could've done with that time!" I would have nothing to say to this voice on any other day, no legitimate means of holding onto my dignity. But today was different.

"It's not a waste at all, actually. That night went exactly as planned," responded the bargaining part of my brain.

"Oh really?" said the parentally disappointed part.

"Yes really. I spent the night that way on purpose."

“You can convince yourself that that’s the truth if you like. But what matters are the results.”

“I know.”

“Well, what are they?”

I looked around. I was on the couch, exactly where I’d fallen asleep. There was no unaccounted for pile of paper on the printer. The cameras showed eight hours of my sleeping soundly. I stepped out onto the porch tightly gripping a cup of coffee. Before my eyes, the sun was cresting over the distant treetops, too high in the sky for it to be any earlier than 11:00 AM. Beneath its beams my justification for technological vegging began to rapidly fizzle away. My online escapades reassumed their quality of wastefulness, their cosmic Rightness swept away like a bug in a windstorm. I had not written in my sleep.

The parentally disappointed part of my brain raised its eyebrows smugly.

“Shame,” it said.

* * *

I was puzzled, and frustrated for a large portion of the day that followed, mostly with myself, and also with the Internet for having let me down. I wanted to move on, to accept that I simply wouldn’t find the answers I was looking for, that what had occurred was an unrepeatable fluke. But I shouldn’t shake it from my mind.

It was late afternoon, my neighbor was chopping wood in the adjacent yard, and the phrase cabin fever was pinging around my mind, even though I considered there to be something too perfect and consequently kind of hollow about experiencing cabin fever in an actual cabin. In order to cope with my technological frustrations, I decided to make prudent use of technology.

I'd done plenty of sleepwalking research as a teenager, but not since high school, both because my ailment had subsided (just laying dormant, I now realized) and because I'd grown tired of my investigations bringing me to a certain class of final paragraph. The class which brought to mind those vastly unsatisfying, final remarks of National Geographic specials on Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster e.g. "There are plenty of theories out there... but we might not ever know the answer to this mystery..." *Cue eerie, X-files reminiscent theme song.* "Until next time on Paranormal Beasts: Revealed!"— The fact-finding blueballs that seemingly underwrite the whole existence and promise of the program, and make the viewer curse himself for not having anticipated this disappointing conclusion from the onset. I mean, did the viewer seriously think they were going find Bigfoot this time? What had he been thinking?

This is all to say that I expected to find very little information as I typed the words "writing in my sleep" into my search engine, and was pleasantly surprised to discover a sleep disorder forum in which a security guard who worked the graveyard shift rambled about how he would drift off on the job and write poetry, and an aging schoolteacher claimed to have written her letter of resignation while fast asleep. But these were rambling, possibly drug-addled accounts, written six or seven years before. In addition, I had no way of contacting the writers, since they'd both deactivated their accounts since posting. The most fecund result I came across was the blog of a Californian painter named Raina Smith, who appeared to enjoy moderate success selling off her "REMpresentations." The first blog post told her story of discovering she'd unwittingly painted a portrait of her brother in the days leading up to Christmas. Apparently she'd spent several weeks attempting to create this portrait as a gift to him, finding that her attempts were foiled by her own lack of "creative power." When the holiday arrived, she was prepared to apologize for her shortcomings. "But

it turned out I never needed to,” she wrote. “My brother grabbed this big rectangular present from under the tree and unwrapped it, and it was the portrait, exactly how I imagined it. It was the image in my head that I couldn’t get onto paper. He thanked me but I was so confused!”

This was just the first of her many supposed nocturnal creations, apparently, and she claimed there was a common thread: “Every time it happened, there was a very pressing need leading up to it. It wouldn’t just happen randomly. I’d be trying to make something and be about to give up on it, and then *poof!* I’d wake up and it would be sitting on my bed. I tried to do it with projects that I was only sort of interested in, but it never worked— it had to be something I *needed* to do. Something with pressure attached. Or something I could at least convince myself there was pressure to do.”

I should add that there were other posts of hers that bordered on complete nonsense, like one in which she claimed her ability was a gift from some ancient being because she was “always respectful when she used Ouija boards, and would sometimes get a feeling of holiness in my dreams, this sort of glowing presence.” But even if her story was entirely fiction, it was at the very least well wrought. Nor could I deny that there was some definite similarities between Raina’s circumstances and my own. Her story gave me an idea. I rewound the cameras and pressed record.

Elias 6

It's a surprise to no one that there's a certain formula to superhero movies. At the beginning, the hero must lose something, or have just lost something. The world around the hero must be in need of the hero's help. The story must conclude with a great battle.

My favorite aspect of this genre also fits the formula, but it's not the part that you'd reenact with your friends later, nor is it that part that comes to mind when you reflect on the movie years after having seen it. No, what fascinates me the most are those twenty or so minutes during which the hero discovers the exact nature and limitations of his or her power, typically in the form of a montage, or with the aid of a wise mentor archetype. In spider-man movies, this Discovery Phase entails a lot of failed building jumps, and web-shooting mishaps, before that pivotal moment arrives in which the music swells and he discovers the exact positioning his fingers need to be in to shoot a web across a ravine. In Batman, it's when Bruce Wayne learns to overcome his fear of bats, and in doing so gains access to that dark and brooding psychological place inside him, to the extent that he can become The Batman. Once this happens, the learning process is complete. The hopeful has become the Superhero. Inevitably, these moments of discovery resurface as themes when we arrive at the movie's climax—the hero must use the same knowledge from their training period in order to defeat the Final Boss— but it is not the foreshadowing aspect of this device that intrigues me. Rather it is the innumerable possibilities that blossom from the hero's new understanding— the various and hypothetical applications of the power that the movie can never quite live up to— this is what gets my mind going.

I felt a similar excitement on the night that I encountered the blogposts of Raina Smith, and on the morning afterwards, when raindrops gently pelted me awake. I rubbed my eyes and looked around. I saw the underside of the sparse canopy that surrounded the cabin; I smelled dew.

“I’m on the back-porch,” I said, to no one in particular. Toledo meowed at me through the screen door separating me from the living room. I stood upright and examined my forearms, which were shiny with water droplets. I repeated, more excitedly:

“I’m on the back-porch!” Toledo began licking himself disinterestedly.

“Don’t you understand, Toledo? I’m on the porch!” It occurred to me, in the midst of my delight that, while my position was a clear indicator of somnambulism, there was nothing to suggest that there had been any creative output. It was quite possible that I’d just gotten up and walked to the porch. I ran inside, and my doubts vanished. There, atop the printer, piled even higher than two days before, was a new stack of papers. I had no memory of how it’d gotten there, and that lapse in knowledge was sublime. I barely needed to look at them to know that they featured the stories for levels six and seven of G.G. After tossing the sheets around the living room, perhaps a little indulgently, I calmed slightly and plugged the first camera into my laptop. I appeared on the screen, the details of my face obscured by the multicolor, heat-sensing filter of the camera’s nighttime setting. The recording of me backed away from the camera lens, and sat down on the couch.

“This is Elias Wallace, and this is an experiment using the methods of Raina Smith,” said my recording. The recorded version of me placed the laptop on his stomach and stated, with increasing gusto: “I need to write levels six and seven for Gridiron Ghoul. I need to write levels six and seven for Gridiron Ghoul. I need to write levels six and seven for Gridiron Ghoul. I need to write levels six and seven for Gridiron Ghoul.” He briefly

changed the litany to: “I need to create something magnificent.” Before reverting back to “I need to write levels six and seven for Gridiron Ghoul.” He continued doing this for a long time before trailing off. He made a few more attempts, each shorter than the last. Then he got quiet. His head dropped to one shoulder. He was asleep. I started fast-forwarded, and made it only about twenty minutes in before he began to stir again. I clicked the play button, my breath catching in disbelief. He raised his head and moved the laptop off his stomach. He got up with the device, and with a sort of spry matter-of-factness walked to the light-switch on the living room wall. He flicked it on and placed the laptop at the desk, making sure to plug it into the nearby charger. The camera automatically switched over to its daylight setting— an unexpected stroke of luck— so I had a clear view of him approaching the desk. I thought he was about to start typing but instead he strode out of frame.

“Fuck.” I said. I ran to the other camera and, after plugging it into the computer, quickly fast-forwarded to the moment when the other footage had left off. He strode into view and walked to the fridge. He removed a plastic bottle of orange juice, a carton of eggs, some yogurt, a bag of frozen fruit, and flaxseed oil (these last two must’ve been remnants of Emma’s time) and proceeded to blend a protein shake. I laughed aloud as I watched. I wasn’t even sure that the conscious me knew how to work that blender, let alone take the initiative to make something. The recorded me diligently replaced the ingredients he’d used on their respective shelves, downed the shake with a satisfied sigh, and washed out the blender. Then he dropped to the floor and did —by my count— thirty push-ups.

What the hell are you doing? I came close to saying this aloud. I hadn’t done push-ups since High School phys-ed. How did I even have that in me? How could be body have sustained that? Now I that I thought about it, I did feel a slight soreness in my chest, which, now that I thought about it some more, I was actually sort of bizarrely proud of, though I

couldn't really take responsibility for the decision to exercise. With the completion of his workout, the recorded me made his way back down out of frame. I switched to the first camera and discovered him sitting at the desk at 3:21. He cracked his knuckles and, retaining noticeably good posture, began to type. There were no breaks for thought in between his typing. He maintained an even rhythm of typing for – some fast-forwarding revealed – two hours and six minutes. Then he stood beside the desk with one hand on the printer, one on his hip, and watched as the papers materialized in the tray. Curiously, he seemed to quit out without saving his work (I quickly verified this by checking my computer's hard-drive).

He whistled, stapled, stacked.

Then, like it was the most natural thing in the world to do, he opened the sliding door to the back-porch and lay down to sleep.

Rayanna 4

We reached the broad semi-circle of dirt that gave way to the road. As we approached the vans we'd arrived in, I became aware of something troubling. I had not seen Stephen, a relatively new member of the group, during the whole walk back from the clearing. I stood watching the Empathizers enter into the unfiltered sunlight, counting each of them to be sure. I tapped Archie on the arm and asked if he thought the newcomer might have gotten lost.

"He was walking a little ways behind the group," he said. I called to him a couple of times but he wouldn't catch up."

"I see."

"I would've gone after him but we were so moving quickly."

"He looked scared back in the clearing."

"I was scared back in the clearing. Raye, I'm still scared now. Why didn't Ron—?"

"Later. Wait until we're alone." I told him.

"What if he went after the bear?"

"It could be. We should wait for a while. See if he turns up."

"All of us?"

"Just you and me." I paused. "And Olivia. I want to talk with you two, anyway. The rest of them can take the vans. We'll take Ron's car. He gave me the keys." I jangled the keys in front of Archie. He glanced at my father's Volvo parked slightly apart from the three vans. My father's car was scratched, ramshackle and dirty. It blended in perfectly with the surroundings. Ron had driven it everywhere, and no one had been allowed in it besides him,

me, and on rare occasions, Edgar. It was the same car he and I had ridden in when we went out recruiting.

“You sure that’s a good idea?” asked Archie.

“It’s fine. Ron’s not going to drive it anytime soon.” Archie looked troubled by my saying this. When I thought about it, so was I. Had I just made a joke about my father’s death?

“Go grab Olivia,” I told him. “Tell her to come wait with us.” Archie gave me an A-Okay sign as he walked over to Olivia. She was standing by the van Edgar had been driving, having a quiet conversation with her boyfriend, Jacob. I wondered what they were saying to each other. How much of that hushed, tender chat consisted of worry? How much of it consisted of assuagement? Archie said a few words to her and she nodded, soberly. She hugged Jacob tightly and kissed him on the cheek. Then she left him to climb into the back of Edgar’s van.

“I’ll see you all back at Allway!” I yelled in the direction of the vans, once Olivia stood my side. “Start brunch without me.” My words echoed in my head as two of the vans started up their engines and pulled onto the road. Was “start brunch without me?” the right thing to say? Was that authoritative? It sounded juvenile to me. Edgar’s van stayed in the lot for a few moments, and I thought he might get out to challenge me again. But then he drove swiftly onto the road and the line of trees blocked his vehicle from the sight.

“You okay, Raye?” asked Olivia, resting her sweater on the hood of the car.

“I’m okay. How about you?”

“Still processing.”

“I understand. What about you, Archie?” He was staring into the woods. He said he was processing too. Olivia added that the events of the day would take a while to sink in.

Sweat dripped from her neck and onto her bare shoulders. I suddenly heard my father's voice in my head, warning us during our meeting the previous night: "Bring layers. The morning will be cool, but it'll warm up quickly." The suggestion of tears welled up at the back of my throat. I quickly stifled it. I told them that they needed to listen to me carefully. Things were going to change in the group now that my father was gone.

"What happened today was just the beginning of the Omni's plan."

"Okay," said Olivia.

"Are you ready for the rest of it? If you don't trust me, you're not ready."

"We trust you, Raye," said Archie. I handed Olivia a copy of the paper my father had given me. "This will help make sense of things."

"What is it?"

"Read the title."

"A Guide to Accessing the Empathy Project Doctrine" Archie read aloud, looking over Olivia's shoulder. "We have a doctrine? This whole time we had a doctrine and no one told me?"

"It hasn't been written yet," I said. "My father predicted it would be it after the Omni visited him for the second time."

"Why are you telling us first?" asked Olivia. "Sorry, I know I'm asking a lot of questions."

"It's okay. I'm telling you two first because I want you to help me lead the new Project. People are going to be scared away by what happened. That's inevitable. There are going to be doubts. They'll need to know someone is looking after them."

"You're respected in the group. You don't need us," said Olivia.

“I’m respected, but there still going to be those who disagree with my stepping into the role— those who see the opportunity to take power and want to seize it.”

“Edgar,” said Archie.

“I don’t want to assume anything. Either way I want you two in my corner. I trust you two the most.”

“Of course, Raye,” said Archie. “I’m behind you just as I was behind your father.”

“I’m honored you’d think of me,” said Olivia. Then after a pause: “But I wasn’t in Ron’s inner circle, like you or Archie. I was just another member of the group.”

“Everyone knows you, Liv. Everyone likes you.” I thought about saying more, but she was already fighting back a proud smile; what I’d said was enough.

“Can I ask you a question, Raye?” asked Archie, nervously. “It’s something Edgar asked you before.” I told him to go ahead. “Why didn’t Ron tell us you were going to be the new leader? It just seems so unusual for him.” I paused for a moment. It was a good question.

“Because he knew that his word would go so far, given the circumstances.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Everyone in the group has always followed Ron, without question. But when you watch someone endure a certain kind of fate, you start to wonder about the things that person has told you.”

“I don’t doubt his word,” said Archie.

“And that’s good of you, Archie. But you can see how others might doubt him, after watching what they mistakenly perceive as his death?” Archie scratched his stubble, solemnly.

“Yeah I can see that.”

“But this,” I held the document at his eye level. “You can’t refute this. This is all I need to prove myself to the group.” They seemed convinced, perhaps too easily. I’d only given them half of my answer, after all. The other half was a theory of mine that still trembled beneath the surface, although it became clearer and clearer as I gave it more attention. “So why didn’t Ron just tell us that?” said Archie’s voice again in my head. Why not indeed? Why make me go through the trouble of convincing everyone? The explanation that satisfied Archie and Olivia (the very same explanation my father had offered me) only went so far: the Empathizers might be worried or afraid after the bear attack, but not so much that they’d forget all Ron had ever done for them. He was smart enough to know that. No, there was something more to his silence; I sensed it. He wanted to test me. He wanted me to prove to him, even after his departure, that I was equipped to handle my new responsibilities. He was asking me to use the confusion he’d left in his wake to declare myself a true leader. That was why he’d joined Hive Mind in such a dark, unexpected way. That was why he gave me the doctrine but told no one of it. That was why he’d explained to me only part of his plan. He was giving me a challenge, as he had always done, ensuring that I did not feel entitled to the power he’d worked hard to get. I did not feel bitter towards him for doing this. On the contrary, I was grateful that he had set things up in this way. If one steps into power too easily, one can just as easily be pushed out. And it wasn’t as though he’d left me with nothing. He’d given me the gift of warning me of his ascension. He knew that with a week to prepare, I’d be better able to handle what would paralyze the others. I was grateful that he’d given me the chance to make clear what he had left muddled. It wasn’t worth getting into all of this with Olivia and Archie, however. They knew what they needed to know.

“Doesn’t look like Stephen is coming back anytime soon,” I told them, opening up the front door of the Volvo. “Time to go home.”

“Good,” said Olivia. “Finally we can get out of this heat.”

Rayanna 5

Allway had been filled with noise and life for as long as I could remember. Only when everyone was asleep could I find anything that resembled stillness; even then there was a tension in the air. Rather than actually hearing the muffled coughs, thuds, and creaking beds, I sensed these sounds with a dreamlike awareness, felt the life they implicated the way one senses a pair of watchful eyes. It's strange to think this gentle cacophony was a comfort to me. But it was. I was lulled to bed by that sensation of knowing I was not alone.

On the night of my father's death, Allway was silent.

Those who had completed the drive from the forest had climbed into bed early, and since then made not a sound.

And then there were those in Edgar's car, those who had never arrived. I didn't blame them for leaving. I'd expected this after all. I just wished it hadn't happened so immediately. I lay awake in my bed in that quiet house and asked myself what Edgar could have said to make them doubt me. How exactly had that mutinous car ride played out? Had he called me weak? Fragile? Untrustworthy? Was he the instigator, or was it someone else? Was I crazy to be angry with him for something I only suspected he'd done? I stepped outside and felt stifled by the humidity. I walked back in and went into my father's room. I sat down at his desk. The tips of my feet scraped the floor.

Elias 7

Not long after I discovered how to trigger my Gift, the fateful day arrived when Jonathan Gust came in to the watch us demo our game. Almost immediately, Noah got the green light. He called Avery, Jackson, and me to the Gridiron Ghoul headquarters for an “emergency meeting.”

“We’re goin’ to Montreal, motherfuckers,” he started, sounding less like his carefully cultivated professional self and more like an excited spring breaker. I think he realized his lapse, because he quickly shifted to a deeper, more sophisticated tone. The noise filtering through the window from Columbus Circle was at deafening at the moment, dominated by the howls of what sounded like six or seven fire engines.

“What?” I said.

“I said that Gust told me the Ubiware team had a lot of admiration and hopes for the game. They’re gonna’ fly us out there next weekend so we can work with their animators and make the whole thing look nice and tidy! Gust said he’s gonna’ be traveling that way anyway so we can ride with him. What do you guys think? Awesome or what?”

I was elated, and also a little disconcerted by how suddenly our lucky break had arrived.

“Fuck yeah,” said Avery. “How long are we supposed to be out there?”

“They said it shouldn’t take any longer than a month. I’ve got my eye on a couple hotels.”

“This is happening pretty fast, huh?” I said.

“They move quickly when they like something,” Noah replied. The sirens faded away.

“If they’ve got animators out there, does this mean you don’t need Avery and me for this part of the process?” said Jackson. I could tell he was trying to make this question sound impartial, but his bruising pride was apparent.

“Of course not, man,” said Noah. “Gust said they need our whole team there to ensure the game doesn’t get distorted from its original vision. He even mentioned that we could play the role of spearheading. So Jackson and Avery, you would lead a team of animators, and Eli you’d lead a writer’s room, I guess.” I didn’t know much about writer’s rooms but I liked the sound of that. I imagined myself conducting the discussion of a group of Ubiware veteran writers who, though they were twice my age, felt a fraternal, unquestioning respect for me. I saw myself fielding questions and drawing plot-diagrams of Jaden Chaos’ story while the rest of the writers listened attentively, nodded, and said things like “New guy is really coming through,” and “Not too shabby.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

“Jackson, you in? I promise you won’t be sidelined.” There was a tense pause while we watched Jackson.

“Yeah, I’m in.”

“Excellent!” said Noah. He walked over to the wooden mini-bar by the foyer and continued babbling excitedly. “Eli they want a final draft of the script by the time we get there. I figure we can have a few brainstorming sessions between now and then, then you can consolidate it all, like you’ve been doing. Obviously they’ll want to tweak one or two things but I was very clear with Gust that the quality of the story means a lot to us— that we’re not just going to let plot take a backseat to gameplay.”

“Good,” I told him, adding, “I guess I’m just not sure why they’re going through the trouble of flying us out there. Couldn’t we do this all remotely?”

“It could potentially work that way,” said Noah “But things can get lost in translation. Working with them, in their facilities. It just makes the whole process feel more legit, you know? Plus, they’re paying for first class plane tickets, through a very nice, private airline.”

“The kind where you get to get up and walk around and have drinks and stuff?” Avery asked.

“I believe so. And that’s, I mean come on, that’s pretty exciting, guys.” Something about Noah’s tone reminded me that traveling luxuriously was nothing new to him.

“Is that necessary?” I said.

“What are you, scared of flying Eli?” said Avery, slyly.

“For now let’s not worry about all this logistical stuff,” said Noah. He withdrew four lowball glasses from the bar cupboard and poured out hearty servings of bourbon.

“Let’s just enjoy this fortune that the videogaming gods have bestowed upon us.”

“May they remain as benevolent,” I added. We all took a shot together. The taste was exquisite.

“Holy shit that’s good stuff,” said Avery. “Jackson, Eli– how much do you think this bottle costs?” he indicated the gleaming bottle of whiskey embossed with the name *McKellan Masters*. From the cadence of his voice I could tell he was warming up for a rousing edition of Give Noah Shit Because He Comes From Money. Fueled by the implicit contempt for old money that Avery, and Jackson and I shared, this game had been one of my favorite college pastimes. Given the high horse Noah had been straddling since we’d begun work on the game, it was due time we partook in it; we’d only neglected to properly badger Noah about the lavishness of the Gridiron Ghoul headquarters out of, I think, a genuine sense of awe and appreciation for the fact that his wealth was allowing the videogame to exist at all.

“I swear this shit on the side of the bottle looks like it’s made of actual silver,” continued Avery. “I say eight hundred.”

“Fifteen hundred, easy,” I said.

“Jackson, what do you think?” said Avery. Jackson scratched the scruff on his chin, apparently in deep thought.

“I mean, it’s gotta’ be at least...six,” he said.

“Six hundred you mean?” asked Avery.

“Nope. Just six.” There was a pause.

“Just six. Six dollars. That’s a classic Jackson move right there,” said Avery, laughing. He glanced in Noah’s direction. Our financial head was conspicuously silent, examining his cuticles.

“Noah you’re lookin’ a little red there. Everything okay?”

“Yeah... just—”

“Look we made him all uncomfortable,” said Avery, and we giggled. “Hey man, we’re just fuckin’ with you.”

“I know, I know.”

“No hard feelings.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“But seriously though. The bets are in: we got eight hundred from me, fifteen hundred from Eli, and... Jackson you wanna’ change yours?”

“I’m stickin’ with six,” he said, confidently taking a swig. “I got a good feeling about six.”

“Okay so eight hundred, fifteen hundred, and six. Give it to us straight, Noah. How much did Papa Rutherford pay for this thing?” Noah said nothing for a few moments. He turned even redder.

“Oh no, guys,” said Avery. “Oh no, we went way too low.”

“Our plebian minds let us astray,” I said. Noah breathed out, exasperated.

“Come on, what does it matter how much my Dad paid for that stuff—”

“How much?”

“You’re enjoying drinking it, aren’t you?” said Noah.

“Well yes, and I’d like to know what the cost of my enjoyment is, so as to savor it all the more,” said Avery with a poor British accent. “So how much?” Another pause from Noah, then:

“Six thousand.”

“Get the fuck out of here!” said Avery.

“You paid six thousand dollars for a fifth of whiskey?” I said.

“It was a special edition! He brought it back from Germany,” protested Noah.

“You paid six thousand dollars for a fifth of whiskey.” I repeated.

“Why is that so bad?”

“You rich piece of shit,” said Avery. “Do you know how much I could get for six thousand dollars? I could fly to Germany and back four times. I could buy a whiskey company for that much money.”

“That second one is definitely not true,” said Noah.

“Do you know what I would do for six thousand dollars?” continued Avery. “I would lick Mike Tyson’s ass for that much money.”

“What the hell, man?” I asked.

“Why was that the first thing you thought of?” said Noah, struggling not to smile.

“I would go toe-to-toe with a squadron of angry kangaroos.”

“What? These are all so weird,” said Noah.

“I’d give up eating candy,” said Jackson.

“Whoa,” I said, and we all went quiet. This was the most radical suggestion so far.

“That’s big for you, man,” said Avery. “You might actually be hurting yourself if you did that.”

“I would just use the six thousand to invent something new and better than candy, like a... Neo-candy.”

“Good idea,” said Avery.

“I feel like you guys are grossly overestimating what you can do with six thousand dollars,” said Noah. Avery asked me what I would do for that much money.

“I’d, like, write really shitty erotica.” The other three chuckled.

“That’s like a real thing though,” said Avery. “Like you could easily make millions writing the next 50 Shades of Grey, man.”

“That’s the fallback,” I told them.

“You guys are getting paid for this job, I’ll remind you,” said Noah. “It’s not that wild that you’ll get that kind of money out of it. Especially with Ubiware taking the reigns.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” conceded Jackson. There was a quiet, sobering moment while we contemplated this. I sensed that Noah was about to embark on another business speech, and I quickly excused myself to use the restroom. I wasn’t in the mood to go back to adult conversation just yet. I just wanted to keep giggling, and talking about squadrons of angry kangaroos, and avoiding the fact that we had important matters to attend to.

Rayanna 6

“Stay in the car,” I told Archie. “He’ll respond better if just two of us show up at his door. Liv, come with me.” She made a scoffing sound at the tacky gnomes and plastic roosters as we made our way up the cobblestone path to the front door of the house. It was a brick house that sat at the bottom of a steep hill, a two-hour drive from Allway. The doorknocker was ornate and looked out of place: a small snarling dragon with a missing eye. I lifted it and let it fall. Almost immediately, someone called through the door.

“Who is it?”

“My names is Rayanna, I’m a friend of Edgars. Is he there?” The door swung open and a woman in her fifties appeared. She leered at us through the screen and worked her jaw.

“Hold on,” she said. After a moment Edgar appeared behind the screen. He was wearing a crummy maroon robe that billowed out behind him. He had a cigar in his mouth, and his face was covered in messy, soot-like stubble. He looked as if he hadn’t left the house in days.

“The girl squad is all here,” he said.

“Can we come in?” I asked.

“Sure, sure. I guess you found me after all.” he sang in his deep southern lilt, opening the screen. “You’ll have to excuse my appearance. I had no idea I’d be having company. Come on in.” He led us through a carpeted hallway and into the living room, offering us a seat on a small, beige sofa. Ugly walls surrounded us, sullied by jagged cracks and random splotches of red paint, some of which had dripped all the way down to the rug. “You could have called, you know?” said Edgar. He took a seat in a lounge chair beside the couch.

“We have been calling. All week long.” I told him.

“Couldn’t have been that long,” he replied.

“It was.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that. I deactivated my cellular a little while ago. I don’t have many people to communicate with after all.” He brushed some breadcrumbs from his robe and folded one leg over the other. He puffed out smoke luxuriously. “Now tell me. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“On the day of my father’s ascent, your van never showed up,” I said. He nodded and raised a bushy eyebrow. “I told all of the Empathizers to come back to the house. Two of the vans were there when we got back, but yours never showed. Nor did any of the Empathizers that were riding in it. What happened?”

“To the van? Well it went right back to the rental company of course. Those late fees can be such a headache. Though I suppose it’s hard to get a headache when you’re dead man.” Olivia looked as though she might dispute his saying “dead,” but I placed a hand on her knee to stop her. He was trying to goad us. I’d anticipated this.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “What happened during that trip back? What did you tell the Empathizers in the car?” The embers of his cigar glowed as he inhaled. Reclined in his chair, his overlarge robe spilling over its armrests and onto the floor, he looked like some ancient, vile beast.

“Well let’s see. We left the woods, we started the drive back... but then I was feeling rather hungry so we decided to stop a diner for a quick bite.” Olivia reminded him that there had been food waiting for him back at Allway. “Yes but it was a couple hour drive and my stomach was really tying itself into knots. Early mornings without breakfast do that to me.”

“Okay, so you stopped at a diner. What then?” I said.

“Well, we got to talking.” He paused and cracked his neck lazily. He seemed to be waiting for one of us to ask “about what?” Neither of us did, so he continued: “The other Empathizers seemed to be having a lot of doubts about the future of the Empathy Project, you see? Most of them were very uncomfortable seeing your father torn to bits like that. I’m sorry to have to put it that way.” He dabbed his cigar in an ashtray. “The fact was that they felt like it didn’t align with what they’d been told at all. Agh. Shit.” He examined the tip of his cigar with a disapproving gaze. He reached into the pocket of his robe and brought out a Zippo. With a dexterous flip he snapped it open at eye level, flicked it on, and blew gently, watching the fire dance with narrow-eyed excitement. From behind a wavering curtain of smoke, his voice spoke: “They were feeling nervous about returning to Allway. And, I’m sorry to have to be the bearer of bad news here, but they were also a bit nervous about certain aspects of the... new leadership.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said. “No one spoke up back in the forest besides you.”

“A good many of them were in shock, I suppose,” said Edgar. “But once that faded a little bit, they became complete chatterboxes. It was ‘She’s too young’ this, and ‘What if she leaves again’ that. Then they asked me what I thought of the whole thing.”

“What’d you say?” I said.

“Well I told them my honest opinion, of course. I told them the truth: that in all my years with Ron he’d never mentioned anything about getting attacked by a bear, or a *next stage* of our mission. He was very clear about things from the beginning: practice E.I. every day and you’ll get to Hive Mind. That’s it. Nothing more, nothing less. That was what I liked about him and his plan— he was always very clear and simple. Except towards the end. Then he started to get all mixed up— got a couple of his screws loose.”

“Don’t talk about him that way,” Olivia said.

“I mean it’s not his fault. That just happens to people sometimes.” He offered his cigar, and as he did I saw that his nails had grown to a disconcerting length. Olivia and I both declined his offer. “Look, I’m not saying that makes him a worse person, and it doesn’t change the fact that he did a lot of great things for a lot of years. He was just a little bit loony by the end of it all.” I felt anger curdling in the back of my throat. “And then they asked me what I thought about you as a leader. And I told them the truth there too. I said I think you’re a decent girl and everything, always very nice to your Daddy, but I just don’t know if you’re cut out to step into his shoes. I’m sorry to put it so bluntly but you know, someone’s got to.”

“Where did the other Empathizers go?” asked Olivia.

“After our talk they decided to go there separate ways. Some of them asked me to drop them off at train stations, family member’s house, and the likes. I assume they’re back in the real world now. And more power to them, you know? I think we’re all starting to realize how much we were wasting our lives.”

I knew he was being intentionally cruel, and unhelpful with his words, so I began to focus on what he was communicating nonverbally. I concentrated on his subtle expressions and fluctuations in tone. “Trying to justify,” was all I caught of one sentence, then: “unequipped,” and “dying words.” I considered his animated tone, toothy expression, and the redness that tinged the upper half of his eyes. I realized that he must have been hoping we’d turn up at his door ever since he left. That was why he was so excited. This was the most eventful thing to happen to since he’d left. What was his life outside of the Empathy Project? What did he have to come back to?

“Why did you leave?” I asked him.

“Well,” said Edgar, his smug smile flickering for a moment. I suppose I realized what the Empathizers I was with were realizing. The Project has run its course.” I examined some of the pictures on a table to the right of the sofa. One was of Edgar and his sister in their youth. They were both smiling with their mouths, but the rest of their faces told a different story.

“Do you like living with your sister?” I asked. There was a long pause.

“I do.” I tried not to breathe in his second-hand smoke. “Perhaps not as ideal as coming back to my own home, but it’s certainly a nice place to be.” I glanced at the paint streaks on the walls, at the thick layer of dust on all the furniture. Like all the others in the group, Edgar had sold his old house after a few years of participating in the Empathy Project. This had never been an enforced rule. It was simply convenient, and expected. “Eileen has always been the sweetest, so I can’t say I’m surprised she took me in, although of course I’m thankful.” I thought of the lock-jawed, leering face that had greeted us at the door. I had trouble thinking of it as “the sweetest.”

“What is there for you to do here?” I asked him.

“Enjoy the relaxation of retirement.”

“No. I don’t think so. I don’t think you’re ready for retirement, Edgar. I think what you want is to lead the group.”

“I never said that.”

“I think that’s why you tried to turn the Empathizers against me and tear the group apart— so you could be the one to step in and bring it back together.”

“Well that’s—”

“I think you want to be the Messiah.”

“I think you’re making a lot of assumptions.”

“What if I told you I wanted you to lead the group with me?”

“What?”

“I’ve put together a board of leaders. I want you to be part of it.” I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Olivia flash me a panicked look. “If you accept, I’d ask your help in getting back the Empathizers that you scared away.” Edgar said nothing for a moment and seemed to be genuinely considering my proposal. Then he placed his hands behind his back and his eyelids returned to their low, disinterested position.

“While I appreciate the offer, I have to tell you the whole thing seems just a little bit silly.” His right foot, dangling over the end of his left leg, shook steadily beneath the robe. His whole chair seemed to be vibrating volcanically beneath him. He spoke in a tone that suggested he felt obligated to inform, but didn’t enjoy it. “You may fool some with your talk of ‘a board of directors’ and ‘new phase of the mission’ but eventually they’re going to see right through you, and see just how hard you’re trying to be your father. If you’re showing up on my doorstep and begging me to come back to the group, then I know people are already starting to catch on. But I can’t save you and I wouldn’t even if I could. Three weeks since Ron died and none of the Empathizers in my van have come back to you! No. You can blame this on me all you want but at the end of the day it’s yours and Ron’s fault. You’ll see. The rest of the group will catch on and leave you before you know it. It’s only a matter of time. I wouldn’t be saying this if I didn’t think it was for your own good but to be completely honest you’re just a little bit too big for your own britches. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help to you.” He exhaled sharply and seemed as if he might be done. But then added: “I can’t in good faith keep going with the Project. After seeing how your Dad died, I’m scared of what’s going to happen in that group. I always thought it was different and special but I now I’m starting to see that it’s just a bunch of people convincing themselves they

want to do what they're doing. When in reality they're scared as hell. I wish you two luck. Please don't come back here again. For my part, I will leave you be. I've said what I have to say and I won't tolerate you pestering me in my retirement. If you bother me again I will be forced to send law enforcement to investigate Allway. It's only out of respect for Ron that I haven't done so already."

"Where are the Empathizers?" said Olivia. "Tell us where you took them, Edgar."

He stood and said he was going to use the bathroom now.

"Please leave this house."

Olivia grabbed my shoulder as soon as the door swung closed behind us.

"He knows where they are. He's lying."

"We don't know that."

"Did you hear how he was talking? He said it himself: he doesn't want the Project to exist at all. He wants to tear it apart. I bet he told them something crazy to scare them off, like that you planned to burn them alive or something."

"You're jumping to conclusions, Liv." I placed an arm on her shoulder and she admitted I was right. "Still no word from Jacob?" She shook her head.

"His phone is still going straight to voicemail. Look I'm sorry I got so riled up in there. Edgar just really fucking... he just makes me angry. He thinks he's got everything figured out. And just the way he looks at me..." She shuddered.

"Me too. But he's just bitter, Liv." I held her gaze. She looked like she was trying to tame her fury. "He misses the Project but he doesn't want to swallow his pride and come back." She said she knew this, but it didn't make it any easier. "I know." She bit her lower lip.

"You don't actually want him to come back and be one of the leaders, do you?"

“No.”

“Thank the Omni. Look, I’m sorry I’m making this all about my emotions. I don’t mean to vent at you. This stuff just has really been bothering me lately. And I feel like it’s really not what one of the leaders of the project should be doing, you know? I shouldn’t be the one crying about it like a little.... like I should be the one who has my shit together.”

“You’re doing fine,” I told her. “You’re an excellent leader.” She sniffed and gave me a thankful grin. “Things will get better once we get our people back.”

Elias 8

The day of the flight found me in good spirits. I awoke not only to find I'd used my Gift overnight (the game outline Noah had requested appeared atop the printer, just as planned), but also to a check from the *Rutherford Firm* for \$6,000. How Noah had arrived at this figure I didn't know— I wasn't exactly clocking in hours or anything— but I had a feeling the number had something to do with that bottle of whiskey. Gust had told us to meet him at LaGuardia for an early morning departure, so I was in the car before the sun came up.

“You sound good. You sound better,” affirmed my father, when I called him over the car-phone.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Sorry, I didn't call a lot after the Emma thing. When we talked last it seemed like you might want the alone time.”

“I appreciate that, Dad. I think alone time was exactly what I needed.” I accelerated, merging onto a New York bound highway.

“But now you're... uh... back in action, huh? I've heard Montreal is a great place, you're going to have a lot of fun there.”

“Hopefully get a lot done too.”

“Right, of course. Business and pleasure.” I heard a guitar being gently plucked in the background.

“Dad are you already working? I called in the morning because I didn't wanna' keep you away from the job.”

“No, no, it's quite alright. I've got your cousin Trevor here to help me out— he's very helpful with the customers. Comes in on Tuesdays and Friday mornings.”

“Gotcha.”

“Before school.”

“That’s great.”

“So you’re doing okay then? You’re doing as well as you sound?” I knew what he was asking.

“Yeah I’m doing well. I mean I miss Emma, of course. I just got used to our mutual rhythm, you know? It feels weird not only not having that in the same way I did, but to suddenly have it be totally, um, absent from my life.”

“I understand, son.”

“I– right.” Of course he did.

* * *

As it turned out, the plane was indeed “the kind where you can get up and have drinks and stuff,” although the chairs were so comfortable, and the flight attendants so hospitable that it was just as tempting to remain seated. The lighting was a dim, sensual purple that seemed to hum with power. The whole place smelled like leather, and incense but I could find no source for this latter aroma; it seemed incredibly unlikely and dangerous that they’d be burning it aboard the flight so I assumed they were synthetically pumping it through the ventilation? Either way, the effect was impressive.

“Our captain: Dennis Farley,” said Gust before we took off, gesturing towards a beaming, mustachioed, quintessentially captain-looking man.

“Passengers, it’s an honor to have you aboard for the next hour and a half,” said Dennis.

“Where’d they’d find this guy?” whispered Avery in my ear.

“I think they made him, actually,” I said.

“Auto-Captain-Maker 3000.”

Once the plane had leveled out, and the “unfasten seatbelt” light shone alongside a small luminescent martini, Avery stood and said: “shame the flight is so short. Time to get my drank on.”

“I think I’m gonna’ go talk to Gust.”

“You sure? They’ve got a grade-A mini-bar.”

“Yeah, I’m good. Gust mentioned he wanted to have a talk with me.”

“Told me the same,” said Avery, “guess he’s doin’ like a one-on-one thing. Trying to get us to shit-talk each other maybe.” He laughed at his own joke. “Alright, well enjoy your quiet contemplation, I’d offer to bring you a drink but I’m pretty sure someone will be along any second to— see, here we go.”

A gorgeous flight attendant appeared by his side. Avery patted me on the back while the attendant lowered a tray of glasses and told me about the different varieties. I drank one and thanked her before shouldering my backpack and heading to the back of the plane, where Gust had said to meet him. I found him in a white, circular room past the restroom, blocked off by a curtain and lit terrifically by two giant windows. He was gazing at an unchanging cloudbank.

“Mr. Gust.”

“Elias. You’re here. Terrific.” he said, when I approached.

“I’m not interrupting?”

“No, just imagining myself rolling around in those clouds. In as unscientific a way as possible, of course.”

“Keeps you childlike?”

“Yes. Exactly. I find that’s the best brain for game-designing.”

“Makes sense.”

“You’re enjoying the benefits of the flight, then.” He eyed my cup with a grin.

“Most definitely.” I raised my glass. “Though to be completely honest I’m pretty confused as to how exactly this all works. This is Ubiware’s private jet but you fly it out of LaGuardia?”

“No, the jet isn’t ours. It belongs to of Air Canada –the corp just reserves the right to book it for private flights, like this one.”

“Pretty nifty,” I said.

“I’m not complaining.” He gestured at the nylon-covered bench beneath the window. “Have a seat, I want to talk to you more about your ideas for the story of Gridiron Ghoul.” Something about the sound of him pronouncing the game’s title was exciting. Despite the fact that were aboard his plane, per his request, hurtling towards his company– it felt like the confirmation of his support hadn’t truly arrived until this moment. A small puff of air escaped from the cushions beneath us as we sat. “You never quite told me what your inspiration for the game was. When I came in to see the demo, I mean,” he said. I thought back to this meeting, when I’d frozen up in the face of his question. I’d done some reading since then, and had paid close attention to Noah’s and Jackson’s ramblings about “ludonarrative,” and the importance of “crafting a story in videogames,” which is all to say I felt poised and ready to talk out of my ass. But then Gust went on: “Don’t worry about it. I realize you’re a creative type, like me. You don’t want someone poking around trying to pinpoint your artistic process. So let’s just talk about where you think the story is heading.”

“My pleasure,” I told him, relieved. I fished around in my backpack. “How much has Noah filled you in on?”

“He told me the original idea of the game was to break down the barrier between a sports game and an open-world game.”

“Right, and he told you that the ref was the segue?”

“Yes, he told me all about the ref, and the marketing idea about keeping the genre-breaking element under wraps. I think that’s genius. People love that kind of secrecy. It’s guaranteed to go viral. So what comes next? Jaden breaks out of the football field and then what?”

“It’s all here in the game outline,” I said, producing the packet from my backpack. “If you want I can email this to you, but I figured I’d bring a physical copy as well.”

“Physical copy should do just fine,” said Gust, taking the packet. “Walk me through it.” I smiled and internally patted myself on the back for having read through my own work while waiting at the airport; I felt confidently prepared. Gust wanted details, and I was ready to give them to him. If I’d had any recollection of doubts and anxieties plaguing me as I’d written the outline (i.e. if I’d experienced emotions at all while writing it), I would’ve— in all likelihood— felt a great deal of unease at the prospect of discussing my work, as though I were about to publicly disrobe. As things were, I maintained a level of distance and admiration for the game plan, viewing it almost the way I’d view a novel by someone else, moreover, by someone who’d already built up a reputation for himself, who had a fan following that preemptively confirmed his worth. I began my explanation:

“So once you fight off that first ref, a bunch of non-player-characters stand up around the stadium and start firing heavy artillery at you— these are terrorists that have been working in cohorts with the ref. As you’re fighting, a voice in your ear tells you that you’re

being *activated*, and that you're going to have to stop these terrorists from blowing up the field. The voice tells you that by beating up the ref you just put the plan in motion, and then it guides you through the assault, instructing you how to crouch at will, run into the stands, pick up guns, fire, and help evacuate the civilians— obviously the gamer wouldn't know how to do this yet since they've just been playing a sports game."

"This voice in your ear— it's from a transmitter? Bluetooth?"

"It's through a chip that's been embedded in your skin. That's all explained later."

He nodded. "With the help of the police, you defeat most of the enemies. But they still manage to blow up a charge in the field. You run from the wreckage and into the street, where a car pulls up and a group of men wrestle you into a trunk.

"This is all in a cut-scene?"

"No, all through gameplay. You'll be able to land a couple blows against these guys but eventually they'll win and get you in the car. They can keep you pinned and calm you down and tell you that now that you're being activated you're going to experience a flood of memories. Then we go to cut-scene. The same cut scene that we showed you last week: the origin story of Jaden."

"This is starting to fit together. Ah, yes— thank you." Gust accepted a daiquiri from one of the flight attendants and crossed one leg over the other. He withdrew a notepad from his khakis. "Don't stop now." A ray of sun pierced through the cloudbank outside the window. The resulting light spread across my face as I continued speaking.

"So you play through that origin story level in the hospital, then we go to cut-scene again once you get to the hospital parking lot. Hold on I can just show you the page for that cut-scene. Here we go." I handed him the pages and he briefly looked them over."

"Elias I'm impressed," he said. "Tell me about the next level."

Rayanna 7

A Guide to Accessing the Empathy Project Doctrine

You are an Empathizer who has practiced the art of Empathetic Interplay for years. Now you are ready to continue to the next stage of the journey towards Hive Mind. You have not been wasting your time with the practice of E.I. On the contrary, you've been ensuring your consciousness is ready for the challenges that await it, of which there are three. While you await these challenges, you must continue to practice E.I. to keep your mind sharp. Once you complete the three challenges, you will be able to join me, Ron Ellison, in the Sublimity of Hive Mind.

Some might think they witnessed my death. But you must remember that I did not die but Ascended. And you must know that you cannot Ascend in the same way I did. You are not capable. The only way for you to join me is to complete the three challenges that the Omni will communicate to you. How will you know what these challenges are? You might ask. The question is something that anyone might ask and anyone might answer. What I say is this: They will craft a story. They will communicate in a way only They can, and in a way only your Interpreter can explain. That is the only way.

I sat at my father's desk, my chair creaking each time I leaned forward in eager analysis. I reread the text again and again. What more could I could draw from it? I'd contemplated every word, every phrase, and still I had no definite answers. Parts of the text or "The Final Statement" as the Empathizers had begun to call it— were so redundant that I could sense my father's worry he would be misunderstood. Other parts completely eluded me. Like, for instance, the idea that the Omni would "craft a story," that they would "communicate in a way only They can." I assumed this meant they would visit me in my dreams, but how could I know for sure? In the two weeks since my father's passing, I'd gleaned nothing from my dreams whatsoever.

I withdrew my cellphone from my jean pocket and attempted to check the time, but I discovered that the device had run out of battery. Ron had rigged up a charger to clip onto the side of the desk, so I had only to slide the phone neatly onto this nearby and expectant jack, and wait for the electric transaction to take place. From the dining room downstairs, I heard clinking and murmuring, the sounds of the Empathizers washing dishes and clearing cutlery from the table. Dinner must've just ended. I'd left before desert. It had always been my father's custom to leave the dining table early, so I'd quickly adopted his habit. My early departures were being received differently than his had been, however. For Ron, the response to his leaving the table was a warm, collective farewell. For me, the practice had been eliciting no more than a few nods of acknowledgement. This reaction stung. While none of the Empathizers had openly questioned my authority, it was clear they were having their doubts.

They were extremely shaken by the disappearance of the Apathetic Seven (as they'd begun to refer to Edgar and the six Empathizers who'd ridden in his van). If only I'd been

able to get Edgar to tell me their whereabouts, then I could've used the recovery of the Apathetic to win over the group. I would have to find another way to show them that the group was not in decline. The Final Statement was my best chance at doing this. The only time during the previous weeks that I'd seen the Empathizers really looking at me, really hanging onto everything I was saying, was when I read aloud excerpts from Ron's text. This was a plan they could get behind: A doctrine was forthcoming.

But in the time that had passed since then, they'd started to question what they had so easily accepted. Yes, there were three challenges for us to face, but what were they? How could they trust that I was the Interpreter? What made me so special? I tried hard to not let their doubts become my own. I devoted myself to the question of what the Omni wanted of me. This question was all I had, and if I gave my brain too much of a rest engaging with it, I found I'd slip into a mental image-reel of the bear clawing my father. It was as if my mind was trying to tell me I'd witnessed something traumatic, which was absurd, since I knew, definitively, that what had happened to Ron was the most beautiful sort of martyrdom.

If the Omni would just get in touch with me this would all be easier, I thought, gazing out my father's window. I'd tried doing everything to achieve a vision. I'd kept a dream journal next to my bed and written down every fragment of a dream I could remember. After reading that eating lots of carbohydrates increases the frequency of dreams, I'd begun supplementing all my meals with a bowl of chips or cereal. I'd slept much more than usual. I'd been staying stay in bed for hours in the mornings, trying to let the sensation of warm enclosure take me back under. But everything I'd written in my dream diary had proven useless. In the middle of the night I would awake with something seared into my mind, always relevant and clear, and I'd jot it down. But when I looked it over the next morning, it was unintelligible, hardly the "story" that the Final Statement promised. For

example, one morning I awoke and immediately remembered that I'd written down what had felt like the most important dream yet. When I looked over my journal I found this:

I'm a cabdriver and so is A. (old friend?) trying to swim up river, helicopters keep landing in between us.

A. is making geography jokes.

I spent a couple of days attempting to decipher these words, searching for a deeper meaning of some sort. "A cabdriver?" What did that symbolize? Travel? Urbanity? Capitalism? It could have meant all or none of these things. "Swimming upriver" was probably a metaphor for how difficult the challenges were going to be up ahead. But that still didn't tell me what the challenges would be, unless, of course, I took it literally and took the group on a trip to the beach. And the helicopters? Was that a sign of the interference of technology in our plan? No, I was really starting to push it now. I stopped myself before I got to "geography jokes," having realized I was searching for value where none existed. I returned to my father's text, in search of a new idea.

The ambiguity of the Final Statement meant that there were limitless ways to interpret it. This was both the liberating and the infuriating part of it. I rose from my wooden chair; walked to the bed, and immediately let myself drop again, fanning out my arms and legs on the cold comforter. Up above, I spied the remnants of a cobweb. I remembered seeing this cobweb years before, when I'd spent an evening playing Backgammon with Ron, and talking about the Omni. I felt a small twinge of sorrow at the thought of this innocent game, but quickly shoved it aside. The web in question had once been a spectacular display of arachnid artistry, vast and intricate. Whole colonies of

invertebrates had trembled in it each night, spoken their final words to one another in that fateful quilt. Now nothing remained but patches here and there, shiny triangles tucked into the corners of the pockmarked wooden rafters. I wondered if, to the Omni, the rise and fall humankind were as miniscule and predictable as this silken masterwork seemed to me. Or perhaps our world just seemed convoluted to Them, impure in comparison with a divine simplicity. I could never truly understand. But it might help, I thought, to review the little that I knew for certain.

They had visited Ron twice in his life, I knew that much. The first time it happened was sixteen years ago, while he was working as history teacher at a high school in Honesdale, Pennsylvania. A few days after his vision, he quit his job. He quit right in the middle of the school year, too. He was popular, charismatic, and appeared to enjoy his work. The student body and faculty were baffled. The ideas the Omni had communicated to him during that visit stirred him to leave behind the joys he found in teaching. The vision also persuaded him to relocate our family. When we first arrived at Allway, it was just a broken-down old shack; my Mom was on the verge of a mental breakdown, and little two-year-old Rayanna was wide-eyed and fidgety. With the help of some bemused, hired help, Ron went to work refurbishing the homestead. He expanded it, repainted the whole thing, and started calling it Allway, telling us that it would be home to the birth of the Empathy Project. My Mom was becoming more and more impatient. He'd promised her the move would make sense once they'd settled in. But it didn't— not at all. He told her she would understand if she had only seen the beings that had given him his instructions. But she hadn't.

The Omni, he said (and repeated to the Empathizers in the following years), existed in five dimensions. According to him, they were both beautiful and impossible to behold. The human eye could only see one fraction of them at any given moment. They told him

about the end of mankind. They told him that the Earth was suffering because of the selfishness of man. My father agreed, and asked if They had a plan to prevent the Earth's imminent demise. But They told him that human life would extinguish itself before it extinguished its surroundings. Humans underestimated the resilience of the planet. We were wasting our time trying to save the world, when we were the ones who were going to die.

He would tell me these things during our backgammon games, or on our hikes, or when we'd go out hunting together, and then he'd repeat them to the rest of the group later that day. He did this so I would always feel ahead of everyone else. It's hard to say which excursions match up with which bits of information, but there's one memory that I believe must be undistorted, from when I was eleven years old. Ron is standing beside the nearby swamp, or "newt pond" as I grew up calling it, and indicating the patterns of the water striders. It is an early, dewy morning. Ron dips the butt of his hunting rifle into the pond and draws large, rippling circles across its surface. Water striders dart away from the etched circumference and into the center of the circles. A couple of them bump heads for a fraction of a second before darting away in fear or irritation or joy.

"Our fundamental flaw, the Omni say," Ron tells me, drawing circle after circle, "is that we exist as separate beings. This wouldn't be such a problem if humans were different enough from each other to easily accept their distinctness. But the issue is that we come just close enough to each other to know we were different. Every human has a moment in his life when he's able to slip away from individual identity and inhabit a mutual space with someone he loves, or admires, or despises, just like these water striders bumping into each other. This fleeting moment of singleness is called Hive Glancing. Hive Glancing is both the most extraordinary feeling a human can experience and the cause of all human suffering."

"Why suffering?" I ask him.

“Because humankind knows what it cannot have. And that is the most tragic knowledge of all.”

“What do the circles represent?” I say.

“The circles are the Omni, of course,” he says. “Guiding us towards these moments of Glancing in the hopes that we’ll begin to really see. Only the Omni know that we need to empathize so intently that we can transform Hive Glancing into a permanent state. We needed to leave behind our selfish lives in favor of forming a larger, selfless entity.” This memory gave way to a flood of half-formed impressions. I slipped in and out of consciousness. The spider web seemed to grow larger and more complex each time I opened my eyes; new spiders were coming along and adding in their own designs, yet somehow the effect as a whole was of something well thought out and unified. I realized that the web was actually made of water, and that I could see into the minute aquatic tubes, could catch glimpses of something happening within them, as though I was examining an ancient house through the gaps in its walls. There were shapes moving beyond the water, grazing against one another and reforming in larger globules. Mental soundbites of my father’s voice were overlapping and changing in tone, forming into a whispered babble. Rising above the indistinct hiss, a voice said: “Raise an immense ear or forfeit the reception.”

The double-vibrate of my phone against the desk’s wood woke me from my dozing. The appearance of a bright white apple on the device’s face alerted me to its return to life. I got up from the bed quickly and began writing in my journal. All this time I’d been thinking it would be through *my* dreams that the doctrine would arrive. I’d assumed that as the Interpreter, I would be interpreting my *omni* vision. But what if wasn’t just the completion of the doctrine that required a unified effort but the very method by which it was delivered? What if anyone could have the dream?

Rayanna 8

Like the circles my father drew in the pond, the Omni were guiding us, even when we couldn't comprehend the details or origin of their plan. Everything they did was in the aim of helping us to join them in Hive Mind. There was nothing they did to make this goal less possible; their assistance was infinite and unbroken. It followed, then, that the Omni would only withhold information if they thought that doing so would bring us together as a group. I realized that their silence would come to an end if and only if we attempted to break through it collectively, rather than as individuals. How did I know this for sure? Another look at The Final Statement was all I needed to confirm my new theory. Right there in the last paragraph it stated: "The question is something that anyone might ask and anyone might answer." Anyone. Not just a current member of the group, not just someone of Ron's lineage, but anyone. If I was interpreting the Final Statement correctly, and I believed I was, then the actual reaching of Hive Mind was something only an Empathizer could do, but the only qualification for receiving the Omni's newest message was that the visionary (or the 'Conduit' perhaps) be a member of human race. In fact, someone out there might have already had the vision!

I raced out of my father's study and ran down the creaking stairs into the dining room. The Empathizers were busy stacking chairs and folding placemats, but most of them froze in surprise when I appeared. I was breathless and dressed only in my nightgown.

"Everything okay, Raye?" asked Olivia, setting down the glasses she was carrying.

"Yes," I said. "Better than ever. Listen up everyone." I gathered them around, and had Archie round up the few Empathizers who had drifted back to their rooms, or curled up on a couch in the basement. Once they'd all circled around me, I climbed onto the

undressed wooden table and again called for them to listen. If I had been in a different mindset, I might have decided not to make so brazen a gesture. I might have thought it irreverent, or over the top. But caught up in the moment as I was, all my actions felt organic and irrefutable. I explained to them what I had discovered. Any of them could be the Divine Conduit. Any of them could be speak with the Omni. This was the Unity Revelation.

The Empathizers gorged themselves on my words; they were invigorated, stirred by the possibility that they would meet the Omni. Excitement hung in the air that I hadn't felt since before my father's ascent. Once I finished speaking, Dennis spoke up calmly from the corner of the kitchen.

"What if it's not one of us?" The other empathizers fell quiet, expectantly.

"That might be the case," I told him. "It might have already happened to someone outside the Project." He nodded gravely and toyed with the doorknob of the wooden closet beside him. Some of the others made thoughtful, disappointed sounds. "Or it might be all of you."

"But the only people that get into Hive Mind are Empathizers, right?" Agnes asked.

"Definitely. But before that can happen, we need to find out what the challenges are."

"So we should ask as many people as possible? Should we leave Allway?" someone asked.

"No, you all stay here," I told them. "We'll get people to come to us. It's time to recruit."

My father and I had recruited fiercely back when I was in grade school, but at a certain point it became unnecessary. He was content with a core group of thirty or so dedicated members. Now my Revelation would change things.

I remembered well the key to my father's methods of recruitment: never underestimate the value of contacting everyone in your life, even those who might seem anathema to the Project. Unfortunately, in my case, the list of contacts was short. I'd spent most of my life within the doors of Allway, and therefore had little contact with those who hadn't already heard of it. But in my four years of high school, and two years of college, I'd managed to forge ties with a select few. And one of that number had become quite attached to me. In fact, when I returned to my room that night, my phone alerted me to yet another missed call from him.

Rayanna 9

“Noah. Don’t freak out, okay?”

“Raye! You finally called back. I thought you said we were only doing Email.” There were several thumps from his end.

“Did you just drop the phone?” I couldn’t resist smiling at his panic.

“No, no, just... I thought we were only doing Email.”

“Is that why you’ve kept calling me?”

“Well. I... Sorry.”

“It’s okay. How are you?” I was on the rowing machine in the Allway gym, and had tugged myself forward at the perfect moment to lend my words the ever-so-slightly short-winded quality that I was going for. He probably thought I was breathlessly giddy about talking to him. Perfect.

“I’m all right. Things have been busy,” he said through my headphones.

“That’s good to hear.

Actually that’s a lie, I’m not busy at all. I’m just used to giving that answer when people ask. Things have been depressingly un-busy. And you know how I get when I’m not busy. My minds been completely in the clouds, I keep losing track of my stuff. Like I’ve lost my wallet three times this month, and I keep misplacing my phone while it’s on vibrate or silent mode which is a complete fucking headache. Thankfully my buddy Jackson put me on to this app “Find my iPhone” which makes it so you can GPS track your phone whenever right from your computer. Super helpful, especially because I have all these notes and important phone numbers on there that are... well I guess they’re not quite as important anymore. You remember how I was talking about that game corporation in our last email?”

“Yeah that sounded good.”

“Didn’t it? Things didn’t pan out. I should’ve seen it coming.”

“So what’s next?”

“Not sure...we kind of realized we were getting just a little bit ahead of ourselves.

“I see.”

“Meanwhile my Dad’s been riding my ass because things didn’t really come to fruition. But I don’t want to give up on this thing. We’ve poured so much into it, you know? This idea has been our baby for years and I never believed it could happen until suddenly, it seemed like it actually *could* happen, or maybe I was just deluding myself and the rest of the guys into thinking that. So now we’re crashing back to reality and I bet they resent me for ever having tried to bring them together for this. ”

“I’m sorry.” I let out a sharp exhale as I intensified the rate of my rowing. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Archie stumble on the treadmill and look around to see if anyone had seen him. “That’s rough.”

“I know. I just hate being that guy that does things that don’t pan out. I hate that if this doesn’t go forward, this is gonna’ be how the guys remember me. This will be their last memory: me, the guy who fucked up at trying to turn a college fantasy into a real-life thing. The guy who quit after a few setbacks. The loser. The quitter.” I asked him what would happen if he stuck with it. “I mean it’s like I said: this one just isn’t in the cards. We don’t have the people. We don’t have the financial—”

“I don’t mean that football game. I mean if instead you did something else. Something simpler.” He made a puttering sound, clearly thinking this through.

“Sure, I mean in theory that’s a great way to cut our losses. But we’d still have to scrap a bunch of the work we’ve put in, all the graphics and story would be moot. And I’d

have to tell the guys to..." he trailed off, thinking. "I guess I see your point. Like purely on a psychological level, a new idea would probably be good for team morale. I think they'd be less frustrated if they had something new to work on. But it's not exactly like I just have a stash of amazing, simple game ideas I'm sitting on. We can't just draft that up, no problem. To replace an idea as original as the one we had, this new thing would have to be just as innovative, just as different."

"I see the issue," I told him. I stood from the rowing machine and began to make my way over to the corner of the gym, where there was a stack of worn, blue mats. I heard Archie wheezing slightly as I walked past the machine he was using.

"Easy there, Arch," I told him, holding my thumb over the headphones' microphone. Archie nodded and slowed down, his cheeks puffing air vigorously.

"I'm sorry. I'm rambling," said Noah.

"It's okay." I said. I slid a mat to the ground and lowered myself into a child's pose.

"To be totally honest, I think I'm babbling because I... I'm a little nervous about... I didn't know how to bring up what happened to your Dad. I just didn't know how to broach it. I didn't want to say the wrong thing or whatever."

"I was wondering about that," I said, my voice muffled against my kneecap. I drew out of child's pose and into upward dog. "Wondering why you haven't said anything in your Emails. It seemed unlikely that you hadn't heard about it."

"I have. I saw the article as soon as it came out. I feel like you already kind of know this, but I've been keeping up with you, and with the Project. Just looking out. Nothing creepy."

"Nothing creepy. Right."

"So anyway. My condolences. I know you two got on really well."

“I don’t want your condolences, Noah.”

“Well you have them, anyway.”

“No I don’t mean it in some demure way, like ‘please don’t, I’m not worthy’. I mean I don’t want your condolences because what happened to my Dad wasn’t a tragedy. I’d explain it to you more if you had any patience with the Project’s beliefs.”

“Let’s not open that can of worms. Never mind my condolences, then. I take them back. I officially retract my condolences. I will admit though, that from the looks of that article written about you guys, there’s something awfully interesting going on at Allway.”

“Is that so? You thinking about finally paying us another visit?” I stood and pressed my arms into the grainy white wall in order to stretch out the back of my legs. The sweat was evaporating off the back of my neck and cooling me down in precisely the way I’d hoped. My well-worked muscles, meanwhile, hummed with a warm and ready energy. Noah replied that I knew better than to ask him that. “I was just teasing you, Noah.”

“I will admit I’m curious. Like, I suspected from the report that your Dad’s uh, what happened to your Dad, had been incorporated into the Project’s... mythology. But even so I didn’t expect you to be so put together about it all. I guess I figured that even with whatever context came with it, it would still hurt. Losing a father is losing a father.” I accidentally overstretched my right hamstring. I felt a slight twinge of pain, as though a small fist were jabbing into the back of my knee.

“If you’re so curious, perhaps you’ve found what you need for your next project,” I told him, massaging my leg. I backed away from the wall and dried myself off with the bottom of my T-shirt. “Maybe you could do some investigations, and, you know, take what you need.” I nodded at Archie as I passed his treadmill again. He gripped the handlebar

tightly with one hand and waved with the other. The maneuver seemed to cost him a great deal of effort.

“Are you suggesting I make a videogame out of your cul– out of the Project?”

“I’m just connecting dots, Noah. Trying to help you resolve your problem. Isn’t that why you’re always calling me? So I can help you out? So we can fall back into our old ‘rhythms?’” I felt satisfied with the silence that followed. I pushed open the door to the gym with a slight bang, and let it creak shut behind me. I leaned back against the brick exterior of the cottage, savoring its coolness. The August air was hot and syrupy. The birds sounded tired.

“*You called me.*”

“Yeah but you call me all the time and I don’t pick up,” I said.

“And I never call with some ulterior motive: to try to get you to help me with my problems or something. I just wanted to talk to you. As for making a videogame out of the Project, I –and I feel like a broken record here– I’m not comfortable coming back to Allway.”

“You wouldn’t have to. You could send the rest of your team. All of those designers and writers you had working for you.”

“And put them through the same shit I had to endure? No way.”

“None of them would have to go through anything like what you did. Those were my Dad’s practices. We don’t do it anymore.” I heard the steadiness of his breath halt for a moment. I took the opportunity to remove the headphones from their jack, and bring the phone’s glass surface to my ear.

“...that you’re taking charge,” he was saying. “At least there’s a somewhat rational mind guiding that group now. But I don’t know, Raye. I’m not sure if I can sell the guys on all that. It seems a little out of left-field.” He paused. “What are you after?”

I’d been awaiting this question. In fact, I was surprised it’d taken him this long to ask. Noah’s paranoia was a recurring theme of my college days, skulking in the shadows of our first dates, and later emerging in its true form. It surfaced as something beastly, and raw under the light of a relationship that’d gone on long enough for both parties to drop any sort of façade. Around the time sophomore year began, I’d begun to single out worrisome tendencies. He would “check up” on me a little more often than was necessary, and become distraught if I was not forthcoming with the answers he needed to hear, such as: “Yeah, everything is fine,” or “Thanks for checking in. I’m great. Just a little tired.” He was desperately hungry for the sense that he was my bastion of emotional stability. He wanted to know why I was sad, whenever I was sad. He wanted to be helpful, and interpreted the moments wherein he couldn’t be helpful as a sign of his impending uselessness. None of this is to say that I was unhappy someone was concerned about my happiness, of course. It was much better than the alternative: that infamous apathetic partner. But at a certain point, that cloying need of his to feel like he was *There For Me*, combined with his unaddressed and obvious need for me to be *There For Him*, soured into something as toxic as apathy. I would feel afraid to let my face return to its sober, resting position, knowing he would interpret it as a sign of discontent. I would avoid him when I knew I was feeling depleted, or surly. I could not let him know that I was having a bad day. The paranoia of his own inadequacies evolved into that more popular sort of paranoia that moves along the plots of romance movies.

“Who are you texting?” he had begun to ask with alarming frequency. Throwing in a throat-clear to try to make the question sound casual. There was one day when I answered that it was my father three times in less than an hour (the truth every time), after which I decided not to indulge him anymore. I decided to remain silent, to let him wonder. What gave him the right to be so suspicious? I started discovering my Facebook “messages” page opened to the least recently read threads. If my phone died, I’d turn it back on to discover a stream of missed calls and increasingly panicked texts from him. He started asking questions about my past, a subject that I’d asked him to avoid. The paranoia had washed away his respect for this request. To this day I can’t think of anything I lied to him about.

“We need to recruit people,” I said.

“That’s... what?” He laughed a little bit, clearly vexed. “Wait, wait, wait. So you want me to send you my team, so you can try to suck them into the Project? Raye, from your Emails, you seemed like you had more of a grasp of reality. But now I’m not sure.”

“I’m not saying that they actually have to join. Chances are you’re right and they’ll walk away from it all after their first meeting. So what’s the harm?”

“Well...”

“It’s not about them individually. But once they see the Project they’ll start talking about it to someone else.” Noah tried to speak, but I continued, echoing my father’s motto: “Word will get around.”

When Ron was still trying to garner a baseline membership for the group, he would often say this. He and I would take long road-trips around the northeast, spreading the word of the Project. I distinctly remember an outing from when I was about nine years old. We’d been bouncing around an affluent suburb in upstate New York, encountering rejection after rejection. Several times doors swung in our faces before Ron had finished introducing

himself. The last house we visited belonged to a neurosurgeon who was comparatively polite, kind, and ready to hear what we had to say. He listened thoughtfully as my father presented his pitch, always beginning with the same line: “Ten years ago, I was walking around thinking I was awake. But I was asleep on my feet the whole time.” As soon as Ron began to describe the details of the Omni, however, the surgeon’s smile took on that tired, bemused quality, which I had become all too accustomed to seeing. It was the sign of defeat. “Just another cult,” were the words I imagined had settled in the foreground of this man’s mind. I brushed my elbow into Ron’s arm, trying to signal to him what he somehow seemed to have missed. *This isn’t going anywhere*, I said with my gesture. *Let’s go home*. And still, Ron persisted in his description of the Project’s daily practices, of the Omni’s unknowable knowledge. Polite as he was, the surgeon let him go on at length, distantly gazing at a point above my father’s shoulder, as though through a nictitating membrane. Ron, at last, finished his lecture. The surgeon softly declined to provide contact information, nodded a weary farewell, and closed the door. Once we got back to the car, I asked my Dad why he’d bothered with this man, why he hadn’t given up as soon as he saw the surgeon’s expression. Had he just not seen what I’d seen? Was he that blind?

“You insult my intelligence,” he half-joked, firing up the ignition. “You think you’re the only one in the family who can read people? Where do you think you get that?”

“Sorry,” I said, buckling myself into the passenger seat. “So why then? Why did you keep going even though you knew he wouldn’t come with us? Why do you always... do that?”

“You’re approaching it too narrowly, Raye. It’s not just about that surgeon. When I talk to that surgeon I’m not just talking to him, I’m talking to everyone in his circle of daily interactions.” He let me puzzle over this statement for a minute before continuing. “You’re

probably right. He's probably in his house right now, chuckling to himself over how absurd I was. He thinks the Project is beneath him, or that he's too refined, or that he's heard about our kind before, and knows better than to get involved with the likes of us. But still, he won't forget about us. A couple of days will go by and he'll try to put the whole thing out of his mind, but he won't be able to. Because he was affected by it. It disturbed his little bubble of routine, it shook him from his boring life. So he'll find himself at a family outing, or a baseball game, or a dinner party, talking with his friends about it, describing the Project's ideas in more detail than he realized he'd held onto, trying to expel the memory of our visit by bestowing it onto someone else. And while it's true he'll probably never come to Allway, comfortable as he is in his little cocoon of safety, someone at that dinner party might just be wise enough to spot the truth that his story attempts to bury. That's why I keep going. Because humans don't live alone, and don't form their opinions alone; we're all one big entity obsessed with talking to itself. So trust me on this one, Raye. Word will get around."

I rounded the corner of the gym cottage, and grazed my fingers against the side of the wooden-walled play-center as I passed it. Noah, meanwhile, was listing the reasons it was a bad idea for him to send his teammates to Allway. When there was a lull in his monologue (when he lost track of his own thoughts), I slipped in a question.

"How about I come to you?" I said. He stammered into his phone and half-formed a sentence about logistics and train-fares. I stifled a laugh, and he managed to say, in a contrived, businesslike voice:

"I would love that."

"Okay, you send me some of your friends. I'll come into the city and grab lunch with you. No risk on your end."

“So should I...?”

“We’ll talk again soon.” I hung up the phone before he could answer. Opening the door to Allway, I found the table was already set. The aromas of chicken stir fry trickled into the room in a hot haze. Several Empathizers were hovering around the dining table; another few were engaged in games of chess, or in quiet conversation. I went upstairs and was about to knock on Olivia’s door when I heard her voice from within. She was speaking quietly and urgently, telling someone to be unafraid. Archie’s voice responded, saying that he thought it would be too soon.

“It’s like Raye said. It could be any of us,” said Olivia.

“But you haven’t seen it, Liv. It makes no sense. It’s just gibberish.”

“So let me see it.”

“No.” There was a quick rustling of paper.

“You’re not doing anyone good by keeping it to yourself,” said Olivia. “Come on, give it here.” Archie replied that he never should have told her about it in the first place. I knocked.

“Who is it?” said Olivia. I said my name. She opened the door wide so I could come in, saying as she did: “Hey Raye.” Her hair was tucked messily into a headband and she wore a white button down and jeans. She looked tired, but happy to see me. Archie was sitting on Olivia’s bed, wearing a sheepish expression and clearly concealing his hands behind his back. I hugged Olivia, took a seat on the bed, and, asked Archie what it was that he was afraid of showing me. For a second, he looked as though he might cry. Then he brought a grubby piece of paper out from behind his back.

“I had a dream, Raye.”

“Lots of people have dreams, Arch,” I said, teasing him.

“Yeah but I think this is the kind of dream that...” he trailed off.

“An Omni dream.” He nodded. “What did the Omni say to you?” He was keeping the paper firmly pressed between his palm and his knee, as though debating whether or not he wanted to show me.

“I’m really not even sure if it was Them, Raye. I never saw what they looked like. Honestly I’m sorry I even mentioned it to Olivia.”

“Just show me, Archie,” I said, laying a hand on his shoulder. He exhaled deeply and handed me the paper. It was a sheet of loose-leaf, evidently torn from a non-perforated notebook, and scribbled on with gel pen. He told me that he had gone to bed with the thought of my Unity Revelation churning in his mind.

“You know me, when I get excited about something it’s hard for me to stop thinking about it. I was lying in bed, my body sort of asleep, but my mind moving at light-speed. I couldn’t stop thinking about what you said in the dining room last night. I didn’t know if I was supposed to be thinking that hard about it, but no matter what I did my... my thoughts wouldn’t slow down. It was like there was a party inside my head and your words were like, I don’t know, the honored guest or something. Just sort of bouncing around and making everyone else at the party really excited. That’s stupid, I know. Does it make any sense?”

“A little bit,” I told him, exchanging a smile with Olivia. “What else?”

“It was like when you get a song stuck in your head and you don’t know if you should just stop listening to it for a week or listen to it once really loudly.”

“I think I understand,” I told him.

“So anyway, I’m pretty sure I was up until something like three in the morning trying to just calm down and think about it later. And then, I guess I slept for a little bit after that but it wasn’t really a *sleep* sleep, you know? It was more of this in-and-out kind of dazing.

And then I woke up this morning feeling wiped, but I remembered that I had had this dream, and gotten up and wrote about the dream at some point in the night. And I looked at my bedside table and sure enough, there it was.”

“Any idea what this means?” I looked at hard at the gen-pen scrawled phrase: "Solasu/4/." Archie shook his head know and admitted that he barely knew how to pronounce it.

Elias 9

From the expression of the woman awaiting our arrival in the Montreal airport, I could tell something was wrong. She seemed agitated and almost shoved someone over trying to get to us as we entered a marble-floored atrium filled with cabdrivers, families, and eager spouses. Many of them momentarily interrupted their crowd scanning to glance her way in annoyance as she threw elbows left and right. Once we reached her, she took Gust aside and spoke to him in rapid French for several minutes. The rest of us waited and idly rolled our luggage back and forth. I felt like an intruder, like an awkward backdrop to the heartwarming reunions happening all around us. Gust's brow furrowed gradually as he listened. Noah, Jackson, Avery and I exchanged glances, unfurling our lower lips and raising our eyebrows in that "no clue, man" kind of way. Finally, Gust turned to us with a somber look.

"Gentlemen, I'm afraid I have some bad news. Come on. Let's get outside. I'll explain on the way." He and his associate, who brusquely introduced herself as Renee, ushered us through security and across several moving walkways, dodging harried travelers and sleep-deprived children as we went. Never slowing his pace, Gust explained how there had been a massive and unexplainable crash on all of the servers at Ubiware's headquarters. The crash, he told us, had apparently just happened, so no one had been able to alert him until we touched down. Every once in awhile, Renee would say something frantically and Gust would translate it, or whisper something back to her. Finally, he said, "I've been told to be on standby for updates from HQ, but the chance of us being able to start working on Gridiron Ghoul any time soon aren't looking too bright." We pushed through the large glass

doors that led out of the airport atrium, emerging onto a street lined with rental cars and stressed out tourists.

“I know this isn’t ideal,” said Gust. “In fact it’s far from ideal.” He started to voice another thought, and then abandoned it, seemingly at a loss for words. He withdrew his phone from his pocket. “I’m sorry that uh, that things happened this way. We’ll pay for your flight home, of course. And I sent a text to see if we could...” he glanced at the phone midway through his sentence. “...Yes! Great. He got back to me. I talked to John Magetti – he’s the one who wanted me to bring you guys out here– and he said we can put you up in a hotel in Old Montreal for a couple nights. As an act of penance.” I glanced at Noah. Since he’d been the one who’d done all the preparation regarding our living arrangements, I figured he might have something to say about this proposal, or just have something to say in general about our swiftly unraveling plan. He looked spaced out and dejected.

“I’ve already booked us a hotel in Old Montreal,” he managed.

“Oh I see.” Gust paused. “How long have you got it booked for?”

“A month. That was how long you said we’d be out here,” said Noah. Gust looked out at the clear blue sky and twisted his mouth around as he thought. “If you want, we can hang out for a couple of days around Montreal... just until things are all cleared up back at the headquarters?”

“I suppose that could work,” said Gust. “I just wouldn’t want to make you guys wait around indefinitely. I’m not sure how long this will take to sort out.” He wiped sweat from his brow and let his eyes linger on me. “Look,” he told us, picking at the collar of his button-down. “If you like, spend a couple days enjoying the city. It’s a great town. Unfortunately, I’ve really got to get back to HQ and see what’s what. But... um.” Renee was gesturing towards her car vehemently and talking in French once again, evidently insisting that she and

Gust get a move on. “Just bill the company for the car ride, okay? We’ll be in touch in a couple of days. Sound good?”

“Sure,” said Noah. Gust was already hurrying away from us, and into Renee’s sedan. As they pulled away, the four of us stood silently amidst the sounds of starting cars, bilingual chatter, and suitcases against gravel. We watched Renee’s Toyota until it was far away enough to blend into the endless line of black and blue vehicles. Finally Avery spoke.

“Well that was fucking weird.” We all mumbled our agreement. On a theoretical, big picture level, we were vexed: what did this mean for the future of our plans with Ubiware? And on a logistical level, what were supposed to do now? We were devoid of an itinerary, and lacking the confident navigator we thought we’d have in Gust. It felt like our Dad had brought us on a trip only to stop and tell us that we weren’t his real children, and furthermore, that he was leaving now. Jackson asked if any of us felt like we were getting jerked around, and if we wanted to just hop on a flight back home. After a few minutes of discussion, the response that he eventually got was that, yes, we kind of felt jerked around, and, sure, there was a possibility we’d be waiting around for nothing if we stayed, but, no, we didn’t want to leave just yet, since it would be a waste to not enjoy the town for a night or two. We got into one of the nearby cabs and gave the driver the address of our hotel. We rode in silence for a while, and eventually entered into the quieter part of the city, where the streets were narrow and cobbled, and the predominant color of the buildings was of a deep, unassuming red.

“I’ve never seen Gust like that,” Noah said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“All nervous.”

“I mean we haven’t known him that long,” I said.

“Yeah... but we’ve known him long enough to know that he’s normally a real cool cucumber,” said Avery. “So this shit’s gotta’ be serious.”

“Maybe serious enough to stop our game from getting made,” said Noah. I could tell from his tone that he’d been giving this a lot of thought.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” said Avery.

“I’m not being dramatic. I just hate the idea that Ubiware has more time to doubt us.”

“What do you mean, doubt us?” asked Avery. “They already said they like our shit.”

“It’s already a real shot in the dark for them, you know? Just a bunch of kids with a weird idea. My Dad always says you never want to give people time to doubt you.”

“You mean: act quickly, even if it’s stupid?” Avery said this with a small laugh.

“No... no. That’s not what I meant.” Noah sounded annoyed.

“Look if all it took was one server crash for these nerds to reconsider working with us, then maybe we don’t want to work with them in the first place.”

“Fair. But on the other hand, what if this server crash is bad enough to take Ubiware out of the running? Like permanent damage that they can’t come back from...” I watched their conversation play out, trying to guess each of their reactions as I might the moves of tennis players. Invariably, Noah would make some bold statement, which Avery would promptly diffuse with a pithy (and often over-simplified) question, tinged with a dash of irony. They went back and forth like this for a long time. They always had. And as always, I was aware that they were going nowhere. Noah wouldn’t let up until he felt that he had a definitive problem, thesis, or ‘next step’ to address, whereas Avery would continue to check any idea that was too sure of itself, to deflate grand hypotheses that flouted themselves as “the crux of things” or “the real meat of the matter.” It was the eternal battle of the color

wheel: the assured view of the world in black & white pitted against the nuanced, and witty view of the world in gray. As I watched their ceaseless foiling of one another: the courage being undermined by the irony and skepticism, which were banished with another valiant strike that was, in turn, insidiously undone by a snarky question, I was reminded of my own writing process.

During the initial attempts at mapping out the all-important protagonist of Gridiron Ghoul, I'd found myself in a cycle of aiming too high, and subsequently shooting myself down. Hardly a paragraph into my first description of his abilities, for example, and I'd already started asking myself why anyone in their right mind would care about him. This sort of question paralyzed the process of construction in its tracks, precluding its own resolution by appearing too early, too urgently, and too condescendingly. But only when I was awake. Something very different happened in my sleep. The beauty of my Gift, I realized, was not in the complete erasure of doubt. Rather, its virtue was that the resulting text seamlessly integrated every question and doubt that my waking brain could conceive of. Anything I consciously asked of those pages had already been preemptively answered in them. Not in a fashion that struck me as a process of assertion and consequent criticism—the snake eating its own tail, if you will. Instead, the delivery of question and answer seemed to arrive simultaneously, so that one conceived of, and understood the whole dialogue between them all at once, as if from one platonic authority.

* * *

Back in Pennsylvania, I waited. The summer drew to a close, and still we heard nothing from Gust. In the aftermath of the Montreal ordeal, Noah called the Ubiware representative incessantly in search of an update. But after a month of radio silence, our

project leader seemed to abandon hope. Our discussions returned to how we could produce the game ourselves. Ubiware was now a nonfactor.

Unfortunately, our near-victory had completely upturned our ideas about the game. The naiveté of our dream of creating a genre-bending, earth-shattering videogame with a group of amateurs became painfully apparent. It struck me, and the rest of the team, as ludicrous that we'd ever considered it. The question on the table then briefly became how possible it would be to hire back, permanently, all the people we'd asked to help create the game demo— but when Noah tallied up the cost of continuous manpower, and gave this figure to his father, John Rutherford's patience came to an end.

Confident that he'd get the answer he was looking for, Noah called his father in front of us. I wish he hadn't made the call on speakerphone. It would've been less embarrassing for all of us.

“You got to be fucking kidding me,” said John, after hearing the figure. Noah stammered for a few moments.

“It's a big project, Dad.”

“It better be. I've been paying for a big project for a long time now, Noah. Four months of this. Where's the profit you promised?”

I'd never met John in person (he had an “important meeting” during graduation, and seemingly during every parents' weekend, and performance by Noah's a capella group throughout our college career) but his inquiry about a profit suddenly conjured up an image of the man as a jaded Mafioso. I imagined him sitting with his legs propped on a desk while smoke billowed from his cigar, his face a jowly arrangement of scars, perpetually one second away from breaking the knuckles of the nearest henchman.

“I’ve been nothing but generous,” said John. “I’ve poured money into this thing. And what the fuck am I getting? You know how much I paid for that ‘demo’ level of yours? Where’s the excitement about this game of yours? You promised there would be excitement. A big deal. Everyone would get excited.”

“It’ll happen, Dad. We just need a little bit more manpower.”

“More manpower?” John yelled. “You gotta’ be—” Noah quickly took the phone off speaker mode, looking flustered, and walked into another one of the bedrooms. I glanced around the apartment that wasn’t mine and pretended not to hear Noah’s muffled yells from the other room. I was reminded of those parties in high school when someone gets a call from their parents urging them to meet their curfew, and their conversation quickly descends from bargaining into desperate whining, causing everyone else at the party to snicker uncomfortably— the kind of phone call that shatters the illusion that we’re all adults.

“No dice, then?” asked Avery, as Noah came back into the living room with his head hung low.

“Unfortunately not,” said Noah. “He says he’s cutting our funding in half.”

“Shit,” I said.

“How are we supposed to keep doing this?” asked Avery.

“We’re not,” said Noah. He explained that John had made it clear he didn’t want us continuing work on Gridiron Ghoul, and that we should take the remainder of the money and focus on other projects. There was a long, tense pause.

“So that’s it? We’re done?” said Avery. “One phone call from the big man and we’re done?”

“We could try to strip down the game,” I said. “You know, create a smaller scale version of—” Jackson cut in with a sharp sound of disagreement.

“That was the whole thing going in. We were going to make this thing big; we were going to do it right. Fully developed, fully realized.”

“Well I’m sorry but that’s not really looking like a possibility right now. Honestly it never was without the help of Ubiware.” said Noah.

“It’s not possibility if we think it’s not a possibility. We can make this work. We’re smart,” said Avery.

“What do you mean we can make it work? Do you mean you guys are willing to start chipping in, is that what you’re saying?” asked Noah. The energy immediately shifted in the room. Avery crossed his arms and leaned back in his rolling chair.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked. Noah bit the inside of his cheeks and seemed as though he might hold his tongue. Then something inside him seemed to give.

“This whole time I’ve been the one supporting this project. Now you’re acting like it’s been all of our money that’s gone to waste, not just mine.”

“First of all, no it is not your money. It’s Daddy’s money. Second– you told us John would cover everything right from the onset. You never even gave us a chance to help.”

“I had to talk my Dad into that.”

“You told us he was fine with it. You said he wanted to.”

“Because I didn’t want to put you guys in an awkward position!” said Noah. Avery stood up.

“How noble of you, Noah. Spare the impoverished from having to confront their own hardship. You’re a real saint.”

“You’re being a real prick right now, you know that?” said Noah.

“Guys,” I said.

“You’re being a real entitled asshat,” responded Avery. Noah said nothing. Insult wars were not something you wanted to get into with Avery. “You just assumed that the rest of us wouldn’t be able to cough up any dough? Who gave you the right to assume that about us? Who gave you the right to make yourself into our goddamn benefactor?”

“Avery, come on,” I said.

“No, Eli, I’m not done.” He turned back to Noah. When you asked us to be part of this, you made it sound like we were equals but you’ve just been acting real proud of yourself. Acting all paternalistic and shit– I’m tired of it, man. I’m tired of you acting like this whole operation would fall apart if it weren’t for you.”

“I think it would,” said Noah. Avery looked at him hard. Then he looked at Jackson and me.

“No one’s gonna’ say anything?” Avery asked. No one spoke. He stood. “Fuck this, I’m out of this bougie-ass place.” Avery threw on a jacket and made for the door.

“Wait,” said Jackson, standing up. “I’m coming with you.” He caught up with Avery and they started down the foyer.

“Guys, guys... come on. This isn’t necessary,” said Noah, following after them. “Just take a breath and we can keep talking about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” said Avery, throwing open the door. “Call me if you hear from Gust.” The door swung behind him and Jackson. They were gone.

Noah walked back to the table, dejected. He sat down in the chair next to me, and visibly sank, resting his head on the back of his hands as though he might take a nap. Rain pattered against the window and the greyish light suspended the room in a wan still life, with Noah’s subdued form as its centerpiece. I felt as though I ought to say something reassuring and defiant, to place a hand on his back and remind him of the fact that this too would pass.

There was a simplicity with which I'd seen frat boys support struggling comrades in college, exchanging hackneyed, meaningless phrases like "we got this, bro," or "they're gonna' pay for this," that I'd always envied. Out of their mouths, these platitudes took on an emotional resonance that I could never quite replicate, always too aware of my own ignorance of whether or not we did, in fact, "got this." Who was I to say if "we got this" or didn't "got this." Who had the knowledge to make such a bold assertion? Certainly not me. But then, of course, upon reaching the conclusion that I ought to avoid speaking with misguided authority, I'd begin to suspect I was actually just being arrogant. Did I think myself above the sort of dialogues, which, while clichéd, were clearly helpful, and, more than anything, human? How many times had I, myself, just passing by two pledges in the science building, felt collaterally reassured by their display of solidarity. "Wow," I'd think to myself, as I caught sight of one pledge gazing evenly into the eyes of another, "They do 'got this,' don't they?" It was just when it came out of my mouth that it seemed to fall flat.

"We got this," I told Noah.

"What?" he murmured, his forehead still pressed to the table.

"Never mind."

"This fucking sucks," he said. I told it him he was right. He added that I could leave if I wanted to.

"I would have." Noah raised his head and grumbled that Jackson had barely seemed to be thinking for himself, that he had just heard Avery being all showy and gotten caught up in the moment.

"I think he may have had his own doubts, too. I think he was just quieter about it than Avery. Not everyone is as vocal."

“At least Avery knew why he was leaving, at least he had opinions about all of this. Jackson is just such a little bandwagon-hopper, it’s so annoying.”

“I know you’re frustrated right now,” I told him. “But it’s not really productive to—”

“I don’t want to think about this like that. Not everybody is as circumspect as you, Eli. Not everybody can talk things through like how you and Emma did, all calm and whatnot.” His words stung and wasn’t exactly sure why. He seemed to realize this.

“I’m sorry. It’s just...” He rubbed an eye with the heel of his hand. “Shitty.”

“I know, man.”

Besides Noah’s breakup with his girlfriend, there hadn’t been a whole lot of emotional milestones to solidify our friendship as an emotionally supportive one. In school, our rapport had always centered on weekend plans, sharing ideas, and trying to make each other laugh. In the room we’d shared, we’d spent afternoons reclining against our beds, throwing a Nerf football back and forth while lazily discussing elaborate money-making schemes, unrealistic sexual fantasies, and playing Would You Rather until nightfall compelled us to put on our button-downs, cover ourselves with cologne and go to the nearest party. At the time, if I’d tried to push that relaxed bond into the realm of heartfelt dialogue –the likes of which I had with Emma, and he had with Rayanna– I think the result would’ve been awkward and alienating.

Now, it felt a little different. Whatever pressure that had been keeping us from emotionally supporting each other, keeping us from “letting each other in” as a self-help book might refer to it, seemed to have diminished when we graduated. But that didn’t mean I had any practice at it. The result was an unfamiliar sense of obligation to provide the type of support to Noah that I’d trained myself not to offer him.

“Those guys– Avery, and Jackson. They’ve always kind of gone in a pair, you know?”

I said. “You told me that Jackson only signed on for sure when he knew Avery was in, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well– there you go. It makes sense they’d leave together.”

“Fuck!” he said, seeming not to have heard me. “What are we going to do? Now I feel like you’re going to drop at any second.”

“I don’t really have any other prospects, so don’t worry. I’m here for the foreseeable future.”

“Good.”

“Just not sure what the foreseeable future entails.”

“Me either, to be honest. But I mean...” He stood and walked to the window, pressed his palms against the glass and gazed out on the city. I had a distinct feeling that he’d seen his father do something similar, and was consciously or unconsciously replicating the action.

“I do have some ideas.”

“Like what?” He said nothing for a moment. I listened to the sounds of vehicles hissing through puddles outside.

“I’ve been wanting to bring this up for awhile now but I knew you and the other guys would just call me crazy. You’re going to shoot the idea right down.”

“Try me.”

“Okay. Only because it’s just you. I trust you to not be an asshole.”

Elias 10

Noah angled his body away from the window, so I could hear his voice more clearly.

“I kind of realized a long time ago that this game was going to be impossible to pull off by ourselves.” He slid his finger across the glass in front of him, producing something like the squeak of markers on a dry-erase board. “Probably like the first or second meeting we had. I realized we were in way over our heads. I’d gotten all caught up thinking about getting you guys together, and suddenly there you all were, expectant, and raring to go. And you.” He turned to look at me. “You had this great script.” He looked sad for a moment, as if he felt he’d let me down. “Then I finally thought to do some research. The kind of research I should have done way ahead of time. Turns out the latest Grand Theft Auto game took five years, 265 million dollars, and over a thousand people to make— and here we were trying to make a comparable game with no developing experience whatsoever.”

“At least we’re not in my bedroom or basement or something,” I pointed out.

“That’s how most indie-game-makers work.”

“We might as well be,” he said. “This.” He gestured at the apartment, the chairs, the view. “This isn’t real. We’re pretending like we earned this, like we own this, but we don’t. We’re just playing dress-up. I’ve finally come to terms with that fact.” The rainfall intensified. I wondered where Noah was going with his monologue. He seemed to be building to some sort of confession.

“You mentioned you had an idea a minute ago?” I said. “That there was something you wanted to say but you thought the other guys might give you shit about...”

“I started to realize that the beauty of videogames is that they can be anything you want them to be,” he said. He came back to the table and took off his suit jacket, tossing it

against a chair. He rolled up his sleeves as if he were really getting down to business. “Games can take any part of life and make it interesting by packing it with action and high stakes and intrigue. You can have a game inside the human body, a game about picking apples, a game about stuffing the Thanksgiving turkey, and if you get it right people will go crazy for it. You know the game Diner Dash?”

“Yeah, I know Diner Dash,” I said, a little confused. I was starting to think his father’s reprimands, and Avery and Jackson’s sudden departure had left Noah a little more than shaken.

“So you know the whole premise of that game is serving people in a diner.”

“Yeah I know.”

“Guess how much the net worth of the creator of diner dash is.”

“Um...”

“1.5 billion.”

“Where are you getting this information?”

“I read it on an IGN board– doesn’t matter. The point is you don’t need some revolutionary idea to make a good game. That’s where we were going wrong. We were getting so caught up in the groundbreaking aspect of Gridiron Ghoul we forgot to consider if it was realistic or not. We forgot about the idea of the simple game. And that’s where it all started, right? Snake. Galaga, Tennis for Two. People loved those games, because they were simple and elegant.” I almost intervened to point out that these games were popular because they’d been the first of their kind, and that no complex games had existed at the time to provide competition. I let the thought pass.

“What are you getting at?”

“A different game, Eli. I’m talking about putting Jaden Chaos on the backburner, making something better so we can work up to the point where G.G. is a possibility. Something simpler. Just you and me.”

“You sure you don’t want to take some time and think this over before we just jump right into another project?” I asked him.

“No.”

“It’s been a long day for you. Maybe there’s a way we can continue with G.G that we just haven’t figured out.” He was shaking his head but I persisted: “Or maybe Gust will call soon and say the plan is back on.” He massaged his temple with the side of his finger.

“No. We can’t count on that. We can’t wait around for somebody else to help us out; we’re just going to spend our lives waiting around if we do that.”

“Okay,” I said. I eyed him carefully. I decided to proceed with caution, to take whatever his idea was with a grain of salt. Then again, what he was about to offer was potentially the prompt I’d been hoping for, what I’d been missing since the Gridiron Ghoul plan had slowed. Perhaps this would be the key to accessing my Gift again. “What’d you have in mind?” I said. He walked over to this leather messenger bag, which he’d left slung around the back of the chair at the head of the table. From it, he produced a laptop, which he placed in front of me, and opened.

“Look,” he said. “Wait hold on. I just have to. This thing can be such a…” He clicked the mouse-pad furiously, trying to make the cursor appear. “Okay here we go.” The tab he had opened up was a news article about a sect in Pennsylvania that had recently experienced tragedy. “Cultic Chaos in Honesdale,” was the article’s title.

“The location– this isn’t that far from me. From the cabin I mean.” I said. “But why are you–?”

“Just read it,” said Noah. It was a strange story from several months ago about the sect’s leader, who had been found dead after being mauled by a bear. The journalist, Trilby Slieverding, speculated that the death was the result of a bizarre inversion of the Don’t-Drink-the-Kool-Aid story, that the leader had sacrificed himself to “save his followers.” According to her anonymous source, the cult had been left in a state of upheaval. I stared hard at the giant block letters of the title, trying to figure out what seemed so familiar about it.

“Kind of interesting I guess,” I told Noah. “But why do I care?”

“You don’t recognize the name?”

“I...” I took another look at it. “The Empathy Project. Wait... is that? That’s the one Raye was part of.”

“Yes.”

“Wasn’t her Dad the leader?”

“Yes.”

“So now he’s...”

“Yeah.” He sat down in the chair next to me and shifted the laptop in front of him so he could more easily type.

“Shit man, that’s... Have you been in touch with her?” Without meeting my eye, he said that he had talked to her “here and there.” I sensed that there was more to the situation than he was letting on. I’ve never seen someone take a break-up as hard as Noah had taken his with Raye. While they’d always had a balanced relationship overall, it had undoubtedly been Noah who had fallen more deeply in love. He had felt a level of admiration for her than he would be embarrassed to admit. No doubt about it. Seeing them together, one immediately got the sense that he had adjusted his rhythms, tastes, and behaviors to her to a

greater extent than she had adapted to him. I knew, for instance, that her interests more often determined the content of their movie nights (I was able to confirm this by browsing our shared Netflix Account. The frequent appearance of TLC specials like *Freaky Eaters*, and *Little People Big World* in the “recently watched” category, shows which Noah would never have independently shown the slightest interest in, spoke volumes. (Incidentally, and in a cruel twist of irony, Noah found Netflix –typically a sanctuary for the heartbroken– intolerable in the aftermath of the breakup, both because of the presence of the aforementioned TLC shows, and because, he said, there were too many movies and series that he and she had invested with meaning by watching as a couple, programs that had been woven into the fabric of their relationship, and were therefore unwatchable in the event of its demise)). Needless to say, after she left, he was a wreck. He went through a three month long “blue” period, which had people suggesting that, of the two of us, maybe he was the better suited to be a starving artist, maybe he ought to pick up the pen and the bottle of whiskey, while I began preparation for my Bar Exam. In fact, his whole breakdown was a bit of cautionary tale for me. I saw the depths of misery, and anger, and regret his heartbreak pushed him to, the way he started, in retrospect, to resent the little things that he’d used to admire about her, like how she savored soft drinks by swishing them around in her mouth, or her style of drawing with rough, fuzzy lines, or her habit of beginning a story with a certain cadence of voice designed to hook in her audience. His resentment would appear at the most random times, and in the form of grumbled non-sequiturs, like “yeah, it always drove me crazy when Rayanna did X Y and Z.” I took this bitterness as a sign that he was still in love with her. Watching him slowly unravel, I’d vowed to never let myself do the same. I’d intentionally continued watching all the shows Emma and I had begun together, and forcefully expelled the parasites of resentment that I suddenly found infecting the

memories of our best days together. In a way, I was thankful to Noah for the magnitude of his sorrow. It made it clear what I ought not to do. It also made clear that Rayanna was not someone Noah was just going to let slip away if he could help it, so it wouldn't have surprised me at all to learn he'd been calling, Emailing, and occasionally visiting her in the years since her retreat. This theory seemed to be confirmed by the fact that the article he showed me was taken from a local Pennsylvania paper. Why would he have seen this if he weren't following her movements? Unless he just happened to have been googling Pennsylvania small-town newspapers, it seemed unlikely he would've just stumbled upon this report.

“Just here and there, huh?” I repeated.

“Yeah,” he said, typing fast. “But as you can imagine, I was really worried about her when I saw this report. Felt like I really needed to talk to her.”

“You get in touch with her?”

“Took a couple tries, but yeah. I got hold of her.”

“...And?”

“She's okay. Everyone is safe.”

“Except her Dad.”

“She told me that that journalist, Trilby Sliver-whatever, was right about the group. Apparently Raye's Dad died trying to reach salvation.”

“Not surprised,” I told him. “The way Raye talked about him I always knew he was a little kooky.”

“Anyway isn't that fucking crazy?” he said. “Raye's Dad thinking himself some prophet like that and getting eaten by a bear?” I said I didn't know how crazy it really was, that I'd heard of this sort of thing before, that it reminded me of a soft-core Jonestown.

“Yeah except no one knows about this one.”

“So...”

“So... a wild shit storm is going down in Honesdale and the world is none the wiser.

This is the kind of story you could make a videogame out of.”

“What? Wait— *that’s* what you want to make a game out of? A bunch of religious nuts who just lost their leader.”

“It’s got dramatic potential.”

“How? Noah there are some very basic ingredients to making a game —simple or not— that you just aren’t going to get out of a situation like that.”

“How do you know? Diner Dash, remember? It took off because a savvy game developer was willing to take a situation no one else saw the potential in, and make it into something...riveting.”

“Enough about Diner Dash! It’s an app on the iTunes Store. You’re talking about making a full-blown console game based on the actions of a cult. Or, at least I think that’s what you’re talking about. Honestly I’m not really sure what you’re talking about.”

“All I’m saying is think outside the box, my friend.” I fought hard not to roll my eyes. “That’s been our thing since the beginning: we’re willing to try to make the game that no one else would. Sure, we may have run into some roadblocks when it came to the sheer size of Gridiron Ghoul, but that doesn’t mean we have to stop trying to push the envelope.”

“That’s really a terrific Nobel Prize speech you’re giving there, Noah. But at the end of the day there’s got to be some plan on a logistical level. Some manifestation of the idea to “push the envelope” that is actually doable for us, right now in this moment.”

“Why are you so resistant to this?” he said. “I thought you’d at least give me a chance to explain. Usually you don’t jump to conclusions like that.” I paused and mentally

reassessed. Had I reacted more quickly and more confrontationally than usual? Maybe I was redirecting the anxiety of the day at him. Maybe my fear at the prospect of losing my “job” caused me to be a little harsher than I normally would. And there was something else.

“I think I’m resistant because I feel like I know where this is coming from, man. And it’s not about pushing the envelope at all.”

“I knew you’d say this,” he mumbled.

“It’s about Raye.”

“I knew you’d say this,” he repeated.

“Yeah you knew I’d say it because it’s true. You’re not thinking about a game. You’re thinking about how you can get back in the same room as Raye. Why don’t you just join the cult if that’s what you want?”

“Oh come on, I’m not gonna’ join. They’re nutjobs, you said it yourself.”

“Right, of course,” I said with a tinge of irony. “They’re nutjobs. So you have to create some sort of pretense for being there—”

“Eli—”

“Some notion that we’re there doing important work!”

“Eli.” There was a long pause while I caught my breath. “I know it must still be hard for you— you’re still processing.” I squinted at him in confusion. He continued: “The aftermath takes a little while. You think you’ve managed the get past it, but it has a way of gnawing at you, trust me I understand.

“What are you talking about?”

“The whole Emma thing.”

“That’s not what—”

“–You’re projecting it onto me don’t you see that? But try to see that I’m not in the same place as you. I’ve had more time to think it over and figure out how I feel about Raye. This really has nothing to do with her, except that I conveniently know about a potentially lucrative situation because of her. I’m thinking about our future as game developers. I’ll prove it to you.” He turned the laptop screen toward me and indicated an address that he’d copied onto a note on his desktop screen. “This is the address of the house the sect operates out of. Allway, they call it. I’m sending this to you over Facebook.” He turned the laptop back away from me. “I want you to go there this coming and week and just check things out for me. And to show you I’m not letting my emotions get in the way, I won’t go with you.” He closed the computer and rested a hand on my shoulder paternally. “You see. This really has nothing to do with my wanting to be back in the same space as Raye.” He’d seemed to regain some of his self-assurance. His voice sounded warmer, and his manner more relaxed. “It’s a journalistic opportunity for you. You go into the field, see what’s what with the Empathy Project, and then when you come back, we’ll talk.”

“Noah, I really don’t know about this.” While I could tell he’d put some serious preemptive thought into this plan, its actual enactment felt rushed, and reactionary. “I’m not thrilled with the idea of showing up there uninvited. These people lost their leader a couple months ago, and according to Trilly Sliverbing, they’re in a state of upheaval. What if they burn me on a pyre or something?”

“Oh stop it. They’re nothing like that now. I talked to Raye again just last night.” There it was: the confirmation of the regular talks that I’d suspected. “She said things have settled down over there. Plus, I mean, it’s really not that out of your way. Something like a half-hour drive from the Paupackan Lake Community. Just use those writerly impulses of yours, and bring me back something we can use. Let’s make ourselves a game.” Still

unconvinced, I got up from the table and threw on my raincoat. Noah shook my hand firmly, a social addendum he'd abandoned after the first few weeks of working on Gridiron Ghoul. It seemed that, with a new idea, came a new boost of charming, businesslike energy for Noah.

"I'll call you tomorrow," I told him.

"Good luck, Eli. I'm sorry I can't keep financing you in the interim." He gave me a smile, which I half-heartedly returned before exiting into the spacious corridor. I, of course, understood exactly what he meant by this apology. It was the thinly veiled threat that I'd been waiting for. If I didn't come back with something viable, I could kiss those sweet \$6000 paychecks goodbye. I threw up my hood and walked toward the elevator, eyeing the stylish, rectangular blocks of wood that lined the walls. I knocked them softly with my knuckles as I walked, contemplating the meeting that had just transpired. Impulsively I produced my phone and started to type a text to Avery and Jackson, a debriefing of sorts, just to see how serious they were about leaving the team for good. Should I be really worried by their departure? Was it a breach of trust that Noah had unearthed his new game plan only once they'd left? Taking stock of the emotional and rhetorical effort required to investigate these questions, I decided to engage with these problems later, maybe after a good night's sleep. I pocketed my phone. For now, I was just too tired. I reached the end of the hallway and arrived at the elevator. I boarded it and acknowledged the attendant with a small nod.

"First floor?" he said.

"That's right."

With easy confidence he reached out and pressed the appropriate button on the brailed, metallic dashboard, his beige jacket rustling as he returned to a neutral position. I leaned back against the wall of the elevator and glanced at him in profile, getting a faint whiff

of something macho and smoky emanating from him. We waited together and watched the door slight shut automatically. I noticed that there was something abrupt about how quickly the operator's usefulness came to an end. The inactive span of time that followed his pressing the button felt so sudden, I think, because it was at this point that— were this the old world piece of machinery it was masquerading as— the attendant would have extended his or her hands to pull the grate closed, and by way of this action (and through no other action but this one) the elevator would have begun its ascent or descent, the mutually accepted fiction of this whole chain of events being that it was the exclusive power of the attendant to initiate this process, and that the passenger might as well be helpless without the attendant's assistance, doomed to hammer on the buttons and ring his hands anxiously until a professional arrived to lend assistance. In a word, this elevator attendant was obsolete.

And yet, there was self-assurance about him that I respected. I envied something about his quiet, middle-aged contentment; I envied the that he'd lived his life exactly as planned, following a clear path from boy to breadwinner, that he was surely comfortably nestled into the familial alcove he'd arranged for himself. He defined, it seemed, an American reality, which I couldn't conceive of myself as entering. A giant, watery globe that held within it a stable economy, an endless line of picket fences, matrimonial accord, success stories, and husbands returning from war, and on the outside of which I hovered, tentatively pressing my eyes against its filmy, transparent exterior, feeling like at any moment I might go drifting away from the globe into an uncharted, cosmic backdrop. This terrified me.

A renewed sense of urgency coursed through me. If I wanted to escape this fate, I would have to return to my plan of achieving magnificence. My mind turned to my Gift again. I closed me eyes and saw an image reel: the nighttime footage I'd found on the camcorder, my hands smoothing out sleep-written papers, my laptop, pens, and notebooks,

and other writing-related implements sitting on a desk. I heard the soft patter of rain, the soothing slap of papers rolling against my palm after I bent back their top corners, someone praising my work in a cadence of voice that reminded me of Emma.

“Are you getting off, sir?” asked the attendant. I became aware that the door must’ve been open for a while.

“Um. Yeah.”

“Have a good day,” he dipped his hat. I walked passed him into the building’s atrium, and began my trip home.

Rayanna 10

For weeks after my Unity Revelation, members of the group would come to me with sheets of paper, printed and handwritten alike. The story was always the same: they couldn't remember their dream, but they knew they'd been inspired to write. The phrases they brought me made about as much sense as Archie's, as much sense as the Taxicab drive I myself had written. There was one detail that caught my attention, however. A select few of the dreams bore a striking similarity to Archie's, and to one another.

"Woebevum/3/" said one of these papers. "gupozesure/16/" said another. "Cuwuyanupu/15/" and "nazedfaci/12/" came in the form of two sheets anonymously taped to my door while I was out recruiting with Olivia. It seemed important that these words followed a similar format. They were all the same breed of strange, the same variety of pseudo-language. If the words are nonsense, but their aura is uniform, is there meaning to be found in them? I sat looking at the phrases for hours on end, spread out before me like old newspaper clippings. I reversed letter order, I searched for etymological roots, I even visited the honorary grave we'd set up for Ron out back and whispered the strange phrases aloud. I didn't know what I was hoping for. The group was more convinced than ever of its own usefulness, but I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing.

Recruits began arriving in droves. Olivia and I made an excellent team. She would get us in the door. She would speak to our host sweetly, openly, like a child convincing a parent of the importance of a school project. Our host's demeanor would soften; they might offer to get us something to drink. They felt bad for misjudging us. "Just didn't know what to make of y'all," they might say. "Who knows, what with all these Jehovah's witnesses and devil worshippers?" While Olivia and our host spoke, I would soak in the details of their

house: their decorations, the smell of their kitchen, the children's artwork that spoke brightly from their walls. Once the host was feeling relaxed and unthreatened, I'd give them a brief, clear idea of how the Project worked, of what we believed. Based on what I'd gleaned from their home, I would play up whatever aspect of the Project I thought might appeal to them. People saw the ease and the playfulness the Project had given us— they envied it. They wanted a piece of it. They wanted a respite from their boring lives.

As the summer came to an end, Allway was more packed than ever. There were forty-five of us living in the main house, and its surrounding buildings, and another twenty-five to thirty or so who would come to participate in meetings, then leave to go sleep in their own, separate homes. Gaining so many young recruits brought fresh vim to Allway. Olivia and I eased off a month after my Unity Revelation, because the homestead had started to reach capacity.

The Empathizers continued to have dreams, and I continued to collect them in the form of those little dream-scrap. It became a dinnertime ritual for Olivia to pass around a bowl, inviting any Empathizers, Sympathizers or first-time visitors to deposit their scraps. I told them all that each response was significant, that every contribution added another line to the Omni's map. By early September a sloppy, precarious pile sat atop my desk. I sometimes would fantasize about Ron walking confidently into my room, taking one look at the scraps, and telling me exactly what they meant, how they all fit together, how my Unity Revelation was not in vein, that I had not made a mistake. The external pressure, at least, wasn't as present as it once had been. The Empathizers seemed content to keep giving me their dream-scrap. They trusted that I was studying, and consolidating them. They did not ask me when I would deliver to them the results of my analysis; they waited patiently.

Because of how immediately I'd begun spreading the word after having my Revelation, I'd forgotten how many people I'd asked to come to join the Project. I'd sent out a flurry of Emails, calls, and handwritten letters to the people I'd met during my years away from Allway. I'd planted seeds and then strode from the garden. Some flowers bloom out of sight, however. One emerged a few weeks after the fall equinox, and it took the form of an unsolicited text from my ex-boyfriend.

8:50 pm Noah Rutherford:
You owe me a date in the city ;)

9:02 pm Me:
Why's that?

9:02 pm Noah Rutherford:
Got ppl coming to visit the Project tomorrow.

9:04 pm Noah Rutherford
Remember our deal?

9:05 pm Me
Yes I remember our deal. Once your friends show, I'll come pay you a visit.

9:05 pm Me
Don't make any weekend plans.

9:06 pm Noah Rutherford:
Wouldn't dream of it. I'll message you more deets soon.

Elias 11

I made a promise to myself upon returning home. Because of the confusion of the past month, I was unsure if I had access to my Gift. I'd made no attempt to elicit it since Ubiware had gone dark, and if I'm being honest, I'd refrained from doing so to avoid confirming what I knew implicitly to be true. Given the crumbling state of my team, and the consequent disappearance of the all-important writing deadlines, my abilities felt insecure, to say the least.

As I lay upon my couch, staring up at the slanted, dilapidated ceiling of the cabin, I decided to make a concentrated effort to write in my sleep. About what, I had no clue. But if I failed, I told myself, then I would take Noah up on his offer. Whatever this cultic videogame wound up being, it certainly offered a more intriguing, and lucrative opportunity than tracking down freelance work on the internet, browsing craigslist, or –shudder– looking for writing work in the Real World.

* * *

I woke up feeling so well rested that I knew right away what had happened. Or rather, what hadn't happened. Oh if only my Gift had returned just for just one night, I would've been spared immeasurable trouble. But alas, the methods of Raina Smith remained in effect– I required a prompt, and evidently the theoretical knowledge of the cult-videogame-mission wasn't going to cut it. It was time for me to pay a visit to an old friend. According to my GPS, Allway was closer to forty-five than twenty minutes away from me. Not quite as convenient as I'd thought, but still, close enough that the coincidence was worth noting. I wondered if Emma knew how near her childhood home was to Raye's. I vaguely remembered her and Rayanna talking about Pennsylvania, but while my ex had

always gushed about the happy memories she had from the cabin, the latter had stayed secretive about her childhood. Once Raye returned to the sect it became apparent why she'd kept quiet.

The morning was crisp and sunny. I got in the car, lowered the windows and let out a sigh. Rolling down the road away from the cabin property, I watched the yellow leaves skittering out from beneath the tires. I felt placid and directionless. I drummed my fingers on the wheel and listened to a radio station doing a nonstop run of Beatle's songs in honor of John Lennon's birthday. When "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" played, I had to stop myself from calling Emma. It was one of her favorite songs, and it reminded me of her so immediately that I momentarily forgot we were broken up. Five months had passed since she left, and it still seemed like the most natural thing in the world to contact her when some insignificant detail about my day brought her to mind. I realized that I hadn't considered returning to the dating pool at any point during that time, and in fact still unconsciously identified myself as a taken individual. Maybe it was time I went on a date. But the thought of starting a relationship anew felt somehow linked with a tangled knot of responsibility that encompassed getting a job, locating an ambitious, realistic friend group, and in general finding a way to re-enter civilized society, and exit Bumblefuck, PA. These were all challenges I felt loath to engage with, and could manage to individually ignore only if I put them collectively out of my mind, safe, as I was, from their gnawing appeals, living in my bubble of rural meditation, gliding from one pseudo-job to the next in search of my Gift.

The last ten minutes of the drive took me onto winding roads so overcome by leaves that the lines between the cleared path and the surrounding land became unclear. Several times I took a turn only to discover I was now surrounded by shrubs, and had exited manmade routes entirely. Thank God for technology. When my GPS announced the word

“arrived” I found myself facing a bright blue gate, behind which stood a several brick cottages, all clustered around a wooden block-like structure, which I assumed was the Allway Homestead. Or maybe they called the whole property Allway? I withdrew my notebook and jotted that question down as my first note. Probably irrelevant, but I took satisfaction in feeling like a journalist staking out a case. In that sense, Noah had read me well. I slipped on my leather jacket and got out of the car, tucking my notebook under my arm and sliding my pen behind my ear. There was a white button on the stone barrier adjacent to the gate – ostensibly a doorbell– but I found the gate was open already, so I walked into the front-yard. Peering in the window of the nearest brick cottage, I saw that it was filled with gym equipment, and the cottage closest to it looked like a play-center of some sorts for children, its window nearly obscured by the top of a plastic toy-house. The last small cottage appeared to be under construction. The front door of the main house was also left ajar, but, not wanting to take any more chances as a newcomer, I rang the bell and waited. I heard someone running up a flight of stairs, and then a strawberry blonde woman in her twenties opened the door and gave me a knowing smile.

“Eli, right?” she said.

“Yes,” I replied, realizing instantly that it had been months since I’d spent time in the company of a woman around my age, and furthermore, that this particular girl happened to be quite attractive and wearing a shirt that exposed her freckled shoulders, and was smiling at me in a way that was politely warm but also increasingly confused in the face of my obvious panic.

“Raye said you’d be around. I’m Olivia.” We shook hands, and I was very aware that my fingers were icy cold. She said, “How about you come downstairs? We’re all down there.”

“Okay.” I followed her inside and caught sight of a magnificent, living room complete with a snapping fireplace, and four or five maroon couches. We turned left before I could make out any more details, and began descending a flight of wooden steps.

“Watch your head,” she said. “Ceiling is a little low.” I ducked just in time. “Ron was a tremendous architect but he didn’t have a whole lot of help building.”

“Ron is Raye’s late father?”

She made an affirmative sound and added that I wouldn’t have to look too hard to find signs of him around the house.

“Where we’re heading down to now is sort of like our Multi-purpose room. We have parties, and games, and meetings down there. But I’ll give you the full tour later.” I was focused on the back of her shoulders as we descended the last few steps, unconsciously counting the larger freckles, so I had a delayed reaction to the scene we stepped into.

“Wow,” I said. She moved close to me and whispered, sending a pleasant chill down my jaw.

“Really something, isn’t it? Don’t say anything, though. Sorry, I should’ve said that earlier.” In front of me was an enormous, black, lightly furnished rectangular room. The most prominent features were an enormous portrait of a stony-faced man against the back wall, a short stage jutting out from beneath it, and the thirty or so people scattered throughout the room in pairs, looking into one another’s eyes in complete silence. Olivia moved away from me and took a seat in an empty chair opposite a greying man in a Northface sweater. A long minute went by while I stood there, glancing around, my leather jacket rustling loudly in the silent room. No one was looking at me. But of course, they all must’ve known I was there. What was I supposed to do now? Was someone going to come talk to me? I stared hard at Olivia, trying to indicate that I was confused by what was happening

and could she please come back here and fill me in a little bit more? She stared steadfastly into the eyes of Northface, unflinching in the face of my telepathic pleas. I became a little frantic and contemplated just turning around and leaving. But what would I tell Noah? “Sorry dude, made it to the house but no one would talk to me so I figured the whole thing was a bust?” No, that wouldn’t do. I remembered, in a moment of relief, that Raye was somewhere in this room. I scanned the pairs and discovered, with still greater relief that she was sitting at the foot of a stage, without a partner.

I wound my way through the pairs of silent pairs, avoiding eye contact even though I knew no one was looking at me. As I drew closer to Raye, I was surprised to find she adjusted her gaze to follow me. I’d been assuming she would remain staring blankly outward like the others, and I would simply have to place myself in her direct sightline, as I’d seen Olivia do. But Raye’s response indicated that she was not bound to this meditational exercise in the same way as the others. She gave me a sort of catlike grin as I paused in front of her, and I felt the impulse to say something. I stifled this, figuring that Olivia’s offhand warning to say nothing might have been a test of some sort. It seemed like the best move for me right now was to indulge in the practices of the cult to the extent of my understanding, so as to avoid needlessly alienating any of the followers. I grabbed a nearby chair, placed it in front of Raye and took a seat. I was very aware of the how loud the metal chair sounded as it unfolded. Raye continued to watch me, but still did not fix me with the intense, unwavering stare that the other’s all had on their faces. Was I doing something wrong? She maintained an expression of mild amusement and let her focus fall on me every few seconds as she glanced around the room. I couldn’t help feeling interested in the ways my old friend’s appearance had changed in the two and a half years since I’d seen her. Well, I suppose “old friend” isn’t quite right. The homebody lifestyle Noah had led together meant that I never

quite got to know her as well as I'd wanted to. She had maintained a certain level of aloofness from me throughout their relationship. This behavior would've stung if it didn't come off as so natural and uncultivated, if it weren't coupled with a levelheaded, relaxed sense of humor, and indifferent poise. To put it another way: it wouldn't have worked if she weren't so goddamn cool.

Noah would often remark that he must have been doing a really good job hiding how nerdy he was if Raye were willing to be with him. He had a theory that just the very quality of her long, silky, black hair put her out of his league. "Hot girl hair," he called it. He said no girl with hot girl hair had ever given him the time of day, so he must have somehow concealed his meager social status. Since I'd last seen her, Raye had cut her hair to shoulder length, and her shoulders had widened slightly. Her olive skin was flecked with more beauty marks than the portrait of her in my head, and while I had the memory of her wearing almost exclusively earth-toned dresses in college, she was now wearing black jeans and a black sweater tied up at the waist. One thing that hadn't changed was that she wore a ring on every single finger—the tiny gems inside the rings had always fascinated me—as I'd once told her, to her quiet delight—and they held my attention now. When she saw I was looking at them, she fluttered her fingers slightly as if to acknowledge the history attached to them. I glanced up to see her smile widening.

"Okay," she said. "That's enough, everyone." I turned around and saw that several pairs of people were stifling laughs. "He didn't know." It was clear from the sidelong looks I was getting from people around the room that I was the relevant "he" in this statement. "Take a quick five, then we'll have our study session." The room instantly filled with chatter and the sound of squeaking chairs. Some people jogged up the stairs and others clumped up

into small conversation circles, falling into an easy banter. The followers nearest me acknowledged me with warm nods as they arranged their chairs in an audience formation.

“So you made it,” said Raye. I turned to her. I’d forgotten what her voice sounded like. It was alto and raspy, an interesting register that cut through most of the sound in the room.

“Yeah. Got a little turned around and may have totaled a couple local trees in the process. But I’m here.” I said. She laughed and told me it was about time someone put nature in its place.

“Good to see you, Raye.” She stood and hugged me. I didn’t ever remember ever hugging her before, so this was sort of an unexpected treat. As she pulled away from the embrace, she said:

“Noah tells me you want to see what we’re about.”

“That’s the idea,” I said, realizing that I hadn’t the faintest idea what Noah had told her about my motive for coming to Allway. It seemed unlikely that he’d been totally honest with her, since I had trouble imagining that she’d consented to have her group, and her father’s recent death, turned into a videogame. I decided to play it safe and give her as little information as possible— if she wanted to treat me as a potential convert, intrigued by the zing of her pseudo spiritualism, well then I was game.

“Noah told me that you’ve been working together?” she asked me, sitting back down on the stage. She patted the patch of stage next to her, so I sat down too.

“That’s right. We were developing a videogame together.”

“The one you came up with our sophomore year.”

“Yeah, exactly. But things sort of fell through. I don’t know much you guys have talked but…” I trailed off.

“We talk now and again.”

“Yeah. Well basically we got a little ahead of ourselves, but you of course remember how that goes. He gets a big idea and focuses on it really intensely. Then reality sort of catches up with him.”

“Well I’m sorry to hear about the job, and Emma too. I was really happy to hear you’re interested in the group, though. People in your position have found this to be a very helpful situation.” I asked her what she meant might be this, and she answered that the community was known for helping people, that Allway had a way of reinstating its habitants with a special sort of passion.

“That sounds nice,” I told her. Her green eyes followed me alertly as I shifted my attention to the portrait behind her, searching for another conversational point. I almost said *I’m sorry about your father*. But from the information I’d gathered about the sect, I was not altogether sure that Ron’s death was an occasion for sympathy. In fact, I suspected an apology might be interpreted as callous, or ignorant, given that –according to the theory journalist Tribby Sifterdin supported– the sect perceived his death as an act of salvation on par with the work of God’s firstborn. On the other hand, it seemed just a bit too ballsy to express gratitude or, to congratulate Rayanna on her father’s undoing.

“I heard about your father,” I said.

“Yes. Incredible, isn’t it?” she replied. So there was my answer. I nodded infinitesimally and said nothing. To remain quiet while she spun her tales was one thing, but to overtly agree that the violent demise of her father deserved the superlative ‘incredible’ seemed to represent the crossing of some line.

“His passing has made everything so much easier.”

“How’s that?” I asked. She said that I would come to understand it soon enough, but now was not the time.

“If I try to tell you everything right now, it’ll be too much all at once.” I said this was fair. She began introducing me to some of the others milling about the basement. Northface’s name, it turned out, was Archie. He, Olivia, and Raye made up a trifecta of leadership, with Raye at the top. Archie must have been in his mid thirties, but he had boyish cheeks that corresponded with, or brought out, a charmingly puerile kind of bravado, symptoms of which were catchphrases like “all sorts of awesome” and a tendency to lift his baseball cap and ruffle the shaggy brown hair underneath. While they both seemed decent enough, neither he nor Olivia struck me as leaders. This made me wonder about Raye’s motives for instating them as the group’s higher ups. Were they in these roles simply because they were unlikely to cause dissent? Was leadership hierarchy pertinent to my mission? Regardless of its relevance to the crafting of the hypothetical videogame, the notion that Raye had surrounded herself with Yes-men was at least worth noting. After Raye sent Archie back to his task of refilling the water cooler, she introduced me to a young couple who apparently both worked with computers, and had earned a large chunk of the sect’s group-funds engaging in online sales, coding, and web-design. They introduced themselves as Charles and Sammy.

“All the Empathizers call Charles ‘Pitty Pat,’ though,” said Sammy. “Because of how fast he types when he’s working.” I gathered from what she and the others said that nicknames were common, and that ‘Empathizers’ was a term they used for followers of the group. I was reminded of the collegiate patois that entailed shortening the names of any dorm with a name that could be shortened, and referring to certain buildings and subcultures by their unofficially, universally understood nicknames. The practice had the effect of

making anyone fluent in the jargon feel very much in the know, and anyone ignorant to it (me), like a dimwitted foreigner.

I waited until Raye got caught up in a conversation with a man who briefly introduced himself as a jazz musician named Franz, then, in what I intended to be a covert movement, I withdrew my notebook and jotted down the names I'd learned so far, as well as a quick note about my college-jargon analogy.

"Smart idea," a voice said near my ear. I glanced up and realized Olivia was standing right behind me, presently cocking her head in the direction of my notebook. "Taking notes, I mean. Sorry, didn't mean to peep."

"No worries."

"It bet this is all pretty overwhelming. I think we would've held onto more Sympathizers if they'd just taken the time to process everything."

"Sympathizers?"

"People with their foot in the door." Olivia explained. "They've expressed interest, but they're not ready to commit." I nodded and told her I understood, my eyes tracking Raye as she thumped Franz on the back and detached herself from conversation. I thought it was gracious of Olivia not to directly refer to *me* as a "Sympathizer," since I could already sense there was a less-than-superb connotation associated with it, akin to the snarling deployment of "tourist" by the cynical Manhattanite. Did she choose to avoid this term because she liked me? Maybe that was naïve and presumptive, but it was still exciting. Equally exciting was a second theory: that her avoidance of the term stemmed from a legitimate distinction between the lay-stranger and yours truly. Perhaps my history with the leader of the sect lent me a certain status within it, placed me a tier above the ground-level

Sympathizer; I couldn't help but feel a rush at this prospect, despite my knowledge that this so-called status was useless outside the fictional world that Allway contained.

It was nice to feel like I had pull.

"I have a question," I told Olivia. "When I first walked in, when you were all sitting in those chairs staring at each other...?"

"Oh my gosh! I never explained that to you, did I?" she said, endearingly bringing her palm to her forehead. She told me that this was an exercise called Empathetic Interplay, or E.I. for short.

"You look into another Empathizers' eyes for a few hours a day, and try to sort of like, become them. Raye could probably put this better, but you want to feel their problems as though they were your own."

"But there's no talking?"

"Oh no, I mean yes there's talking. Every E.I. session starts with the partners talking to each other about their day. You just walked in in the middle of one." She seemed like she was going to give me more details about E.I., but then the room fell quiet.

Elias 12

I looked around and saw the reason everyone had stopped talking. Raye was approaching the stage with a predatory determination. Ignoring the steps, she leapt atop it, and, without introduction, began telling an anecdote about her father. It was a story of the things he'd shown her during a hike they'd gone on years before. She spoke in great detail of the animals in the surrounding woods, in particular, a certain bat she had seen. I was just starting to really ponder the relevance of the story, when she smoothly segued into overt preaching. I barely realized that it was happening. I'd been half-consciously expecting a dramatic shift in the tone of her voice when she began articulating the "holy mission," for her to begin raising her arms higher and more aggressively, and for her face to begin to redden with passion. But her transition was so seamless as to be nonexistent. She simply carried on in the same cool, playful manner, painting pictures of her gods in the same way she'd spoken of the forest animals. Of course this is how she preaches, I thought. The Rayanna I knew would have little desire, let alone capacity to replicate the fiery pronouncements of the archetypical minister. My expectation that she would align herself with this stereotype, I realized, reflected nothing more than the projection of my narrow knowledge of the arcane onto her identity— I resolved not to make this mistake again.

"Now hold onto this idea of the bat as the unknowable," she said. "It can be any animal, but let's say a bat for now. How could this possibly help us understand the Omni? That's the question we should always be asking ourselves." She unfolded a chair leaning against the back wall and sat down in it. "We talk of Them every-day, of what would please Them, how we can replicate Their manner of being, and so on. But let's address something I know you all have always wondered. What are the Omni like? They are masters of the

craft of empathy, whereas we are novices, yes. But what do They look like? What do they sound like? Ron never gave us these details. He told us only this..." What she said next, she stated with more of the priestly, singsong tone. "They spoke in one tremendous voice."

"Yet I knew there were many," replied the followers in unison.

"Our knowledge of the Great Ones has always been scant. Some of you may be asking, as have I, if our knowledge can extend beyond what we once knew, now that Ron has Ascended. He was one of us, and now he has joined them. So shouldn't he be a bridge of communication?" She let the question unfurl over the room, and I sensed that it was no mere rhetorical device, that this was a question she'd been genuinely asking herself. "The answer is no. Once integrated into Hive Mind, there is no going back. There is no use in someone outside of Hive Mind trying to conceive of what life is like inside it. That's like, to return to my earlier point, imagining what it would be like to live a day as a bat. I see some of you squinting your eyes at me now— you disagree. You think you know exactly what it would be like to live a day as a bat." There were a couple of guilty chuckles from the crowd. Realizing I was among the squinty-eyed culprits, I hastily tried to make my face look open and engaged. You're thinking that you'd have a sudden hankering for fruit and mosquitos; you'd feel like hanging upside down was a terrific way to spend your morning, and you'd spend the rest of your time exploring the wonders of echolocation, and the freedom of flight." She paused and her eyes moved from face to face. "Let me tell you. Every single one of those ideas you have is a projection. You're idea of a bat's consciousness is just your human brain justifying what you see a bat doing. You can only ever think as a human-bat, unless one day you become a bat. Enough about nature for now, though. You don't need to hear me ramble any more about the natural world," she said with a smile. There were a few protests in response. "Don't worry, I'm not finished," she said. "I have more to say. But I'm

going to leave aside all that talk of wildlife for now. I know it's likely to sound like nonsense to some of you. But there are plenty of ways to think about what I'm getting at. Here's another one: For the two years during which I was a college girl..." There were wolf-whistles and applause from the followers. Raye turned slightly red, and shook her head while she stifled a laugh. "I know, I know. What a notion." The followers giggled with her, warmly. "But it wasn't all bad. I gained insight while I was there. You see I was always frustrated with Ron when he told me we couldn't understand the Omni any more than we already did. That was bullshit! I wanted to say to him. We ought to know more. Then I was assigned to read a book for one of my classes called *Flatland* and it opened my eyes." A ping of familiarity shot through me for two reasons. The first:

While on a (rare) double-date picnic during the first semester of our sophomore year, I had seen Raye with the very copy of *Flatland* of which she now must be speaking, its pages well thumbed and its margins peppered with innumerable notes. I had asked her about it and she had summarized it glowingly. I'd rarely heard her say so much at one time, and so excitedly. Two: Because of this conversation, I had also read *Flatland*. When Raye failed to appear for the second semester of our sophomore year, I remember feeling that my having read the same book as her offered the tiniest of insights into the actions of a girl whose recent disappearance had done nothing to quell her mysteriousness.

Gazing up at her on that stage, I suspected that, in designing this sermon, she'd also remembered our conversation about the book, and specifically integrated it because she knew I would be there. As she would presently describe to the gathered Empathizers, the plot of the novel in question goes a little something like this: In *Flatland*, full title: *Flatland, a Romance of Many Dimensions*, the narrator is a square named A Square, who exists only in a two dimensional world called, you guessed it, Flatland. A Square has a dream of a one-

dimensional world called Lineland, and tries, unsuccessfully, to convince the ruler of Lineland that there are two dimensions. A Square returns to Flatland, and receives a visit from a Sphere, but the sphere's shape is utterly inconceivable to him until he, A Square, hitches a ride to the Sphere's three-dimensional world, called Spaceland. After these events have transpired, A Square tries to persuade the Sphere of the existence of still greater dimensions, but is consequently banished back to his hometown. While there's a lot more to the book than this, the abovementioned trifecta of awakening and banishment was what Raye had explained to me during the picnic, and what she presently articulated to her followers. She was fascinated, she said, with the idea of an inconceivable location, a place we could only imagine once we had visited it. Before the followers, she recited excerpts from the book— the same ones she'd read to me years earlier.

One of my mental frames from the day of that picnic is of her pointing excitedly to these highlighted passages in her beat-up paperback, the overcast sky lending her face a fetching, over exposed quality. I remember being thankful that she didn't notice —or didn't care— when a jet of juice shot from the clementine in my hand and stained the corner of a page. She was too busy confessing to her belief in higher dimensional beings (Noah rolled his eyes, Emma looked very interested in the tufts of grass she was uprooting).

“Well it sounds like that's the intended take-away, right?” I remember telling her. “Question everything. Be like A Square.”

“I think you're right,” she'd told me.

We'd carried on like this for a half hour or so until Noah had made some comment about being tired of getting out-nerded (I think Raye's uncharacteristic display of enthusiasm was disarming for him), and we'd returned to our respective dormitories.

“Listen,” Raye told the followers. “There is nothing I can say or do to convince you that we’re only seeing the world from one of many perspectives, that we’re only seeing the circle and not the whole sphere. That is a realization you have to come to on your own. We are lucky, however, that we have guides in the Omni. We cannot see nor understand their true form, but we can understand that they are beckoning to us, that Ron has been chosen, and so soon will the rest of us, to join them in the higher dimension of Hive Mind. What’s more, The Omni have told us what we must do, and what we must expect. To empathize, I mean truly empathize every day is all that your leader asks of you: to listen to one another, to let that anxious voice in your head... that voice clambering to construct a sentence while your partner is forming their own, let it rest for a moment, and leave your mind a blank, receptive vessel for your partner’s thoughts. In the meantime, The Omni will come! Not just to me, they might come to one of you, or one of your friends. I know this because Ron’s Ascendance ensured it.

“Ron!” shouted Archie.

“Ron!” echoed many of the followers. I couldn’t believe they were eating all this up. I’ll admit the *Flatland* metaphor clicked sort of satisfyingly into place, but I wasn’t going to mistake the familiarity of a literary analogy for genuine value. This was arcane blather, nothing more.

“While the Sphere cannot yet show us his home of Spaceland, he can tell one of us how we should pack our bags for the journey there. His language is like nothing we’ve ever encountered, but if you remain attentive, you could be the one to whom his message is clear. Once you hear his message, I, your Interpreter, will interpret it for you.” Followers were muttering agreement under their breath and a man near the front said, “yes.” “As they did for Ron, the Omni will speak to you in a way only They can. Just like how A Square dreamt

of Lineland, our Spiritual Guides will contact you when you are at our most empathetic, and when you are farthest from the waking separateness of mankind. When your consciousness floats in the ether of dreams, oozing like fresh cream from one idea to the next. This is when you are most impressionable to their discourse. That is when you will receive word of the next phase of our doctrine. Each night, if you ever find you cannot drift off to the sound of crickets, then think of this. Think of your mission, and soon enough, it will be complete. For us, for the Omni, and the escape from the violence of mankind.”

The room reverberated with applause as Raye stepped down from the stage and accepted a bottle of water from Archie. Chatter momentarily resumed, then dipped as Raye called out from the floor: “Take some time to relax, take a nap, go to the gym. Lunch is in a half hour.”

“Thank you, Raye!” someone shouted; others promptly echoed this yell. The basement filled with the sounds of chairs being folded up, squeaky wooden floorboards, and the thumping of feet on stairs. Olivia, who had returned to my side, tapped me on the shoulder and asked me what I thought.

“Definitely a lot to think about,” I said with what I hoped wasn’t a dismissive smile.

“I know,” she said excitedly. “The things Raye says blow *me* away, and I’ve known her for years and years and years.” I’d heard and seen enough for one day. I avoided the ceremony of farewell and used the busyness of the moment to make my escape. When I emerged from the house, I was struck by how much time had passed. The sun was already low in the sky. On the way home, I managed to hit only two trees as I navigated that strange wood.

Elias 13

Before she'd stopped laughing at my jokes, I'd teased Emma about a certain structure that sat in the front yard of the cabin. It represented her father's virgin, and sole attempt at carpentry; a fixture only the most boldly imaginative young person might call a tree house. It was in a tree, all right. There was no issue at all with that part of the compound word; it's that second part where things started to fall apart. See, "house" implies many things: doors, wool rugs, bedside tables, appliances, house-pets, a fireplace, good feng shui, etc. But at its most basic, "house" implies that walls and a roof are in some way involved. That is where this endearingly ill-conceived project was lacking. One could climb the wobbly planks of wood nailed directly into the tree (a ladder, in the eyes of that same boldly imaginative young person) and find a dusty wooden slab to sit or lie upon. But absent was the feeling of secrecy and enclosure that a good tree house provides. Atop the tree-slab, one felt just as exposed to the wind and bugs as he might feel on a hike, as though on a perfectly rectangular, wooden cliff-side. The only upside to this architectural blooper was that it made for an excellent stargazing post. Often, as I would step outside to load up the trash bin or walk down to the cellar, I'd catch a glimpse of the hyper-clear sky, and feel magnetically drawn toward the slab. Tonight was one of those nights. Upon returning from Allway, I'd gone straight from my car to the slab, eager to look a little more closely at the heavens.

I never looked for answers from the night sky. Trying to find meaning in the constellations struck me as silly, the epitome of the sort of pop-mysticism that white people go crazy for. This astrological aversion was something Emma and I had agreed on fervently. The closest thing to a plea for celestial help that I'd ever experienced was a vague desire to

be *affected*, a longing for the star's glowing presence to creep into me, do something to me, stir me into the action or epiphany that sublime things are supposed to elicit.

By the time I'd hoisted myself atop that modest fixture, I had become steadfast in my conviction that what Raye had said to the group was nonsense. Well, maybe steadfast was too strong. It was true that the importance of empathy rang true with me. It reminded me of my mother. Her obsession with assessing conflicts from all possible perspectives was hardly one of a kind ("put yourself in X's shoes" being possibly the most popular child-rearing motto of all time) but the fervor and insistence with which she revisited this lesson had struck me as singular. It felt like I was expected to spend less time assessing myself, and more time speculating on the motivations of others. I was saved, I think, by my father's pragmatism. By saved, I mean I never allowed my affinity and appreciation for empathy to devolve into the sort of fringe religious sentiments that apparently fueled the Project. I thought of empathy not as the ultimate means of achieving enlightenment, but simply as a useful tool in assessing situation, a device to think my way through a problem that might otherwise be confounding me— when playing videogames as a child, for instance. If I was ever stuck running around a game with no clue where to go next, I would try to place myself in the mindset of the game's creator in order to puzzle things out. I can remember doing this as early as the age of seven, while playing one my first ever videogames: *Bugdom*. *Bugdom* was a game that came standard with the bulky 2000 Mac OS 9 my Dad once had sitting in his study. The game followed an adventurous pillbug named Rollie McFly, on a mission to free ladybugs from the evil ant tyrant, King Thorax. By punching, kicking, and rolling his way through an occasionally glitchy (yet, for 2000, remarkably detailed) world of invertebrate foes, Rollie becomes the hero of the bug kingdom.

In one of the earlier levels of the game, Rollie must navigate through a pond atop the back of a water-strider/Taxi-cab. The levels' misty horizon, homogenous rock shelves, and garishly repetitive synths made it a bit of a headache inducer for seven-year-old Eli, and gave me my first glimpse of the immense frustration one feels when a game is Not Going Well, of a level that is beating the player rather than the other way around. I went to bed several times cursing this level for its monotony, for its sadistic tendency to send me into an endless circle of sloshing and speeding atop the back of that six-legged cabbie. What is wrong with the maker's of this game? I found myself thinking (a starkly different sentiment from the admiration and gratitude I'd previously been feeling towards *Bugdom's* architects). Why are they so cruel? Why are they torturing me? Who thought this stupid pond was a good idea? Then I realized how silly these questions were. No gamemaker would set out to intentionally torture his or her gamers, (at least no gamemaker whose game was targeted at bug-loving children of Mac-buyers). No. This game was designed with me in mind. It would not offer a problem without a solution, and it would not make that solution cruelly complicated; there had to be some sort of indicator in the game as to which way to navigate my little water strider next, as to how to exit the infinite loop.

The solution was uncomplicated; it was simply to follow the narrower of two paths at a mid-pond juncture. I'd been ignoring the correct path because of how slim and nondescript its entrance was, but by assuming well-thought-out intentions on the behalf of the game-maker, I saw what needed to happen. I realized that the symmetrical nutshells encircling the path's opening were a hint. Nutshells, themselves, weren't some universal indicator of correctness, but the congruency of these nuts was important, was a message to assist in the gamer's process of discovery & interaction. It was a means of reaching out and tapping the gamer on the shoulder to say: "Hey, I know you may be ignoring this path

because you can barely see it. Here's something to show you that it's important." That empathetic pact between player and creator was always something I enjoyed about games, and something I've since striven to bring to my writing, and my relationships.

I had watched closely for the nutshells that Emma left scattered in her vicinity: the signs that she needed help, was in the mood to have sex, wanted to be left alone for a little while. To have paid so much attention, and worked so hard to be empathetic, then, made her departure all the more painful. It also made me trust a little bit less in the enterprise of empathy as a whole. With her gone, I'd begun fantasizing about becoming a fiercely individualistic Eli, one who shirks the burden of others' emotional baggage for self-gain. But I was not that man. I couldn't deny that. Take, as evidence of this, the fact that many of Raye's ideas had resonated with me, had validated and reinstated vigor in the part of me that valued active and empathetic listening.

I reached up and pinched the tip of a perfectly oblong leaf. I briefly played tug-of-war with the branch it was attached to. When it detached, the branch bounced back and set the whole tree whispering, so that it seemed like there was gossiping all around me. Who was this strange man butchering leaves? The branches said. How dare he disturb the peace from his slab of dubious wood? Didn't he know his place was on the ground? I gripped the smooth sides of the leaf with both hands and applied pressure. It became taut. I rent it in two. The slab wobbled beneath me.

Empathy was good. Empathy was important. Empathy was something I wanted to have as part of my life. But I had no patience with this Omni business. The existence of these supposed higher dimensional beings was unverifiable, and the worship surrounding them appeared directionless, and convoluted by the transference of power from father to daughter. There were too many dreams, too many dreamers, and too many amendments to

how one ought to dream. The whole mission of the Project reminded me of some confused Constitution. I respected Raye, and couldn't deny that she had a certain allure about her, but the impression I got while watching her was of someone struggling to make order from chaos, someone who wanted desperately to clarify for others what was still confusing to her. I found her interesting, but not in a way that was conducive to a videogame protagonist. How was I supposed to condense her cryptic parables, involved ideas, and crowd of followers into a game as good as Gridiron Ghoul? I remembered what I had said to Noah the day before, and felt a quick rush of satisfaction at how cogently I'd put it: "There are certain vital ingredients that a videogame requires." Where was the possibility of combat so necessary to videogames? Where was my super-villain? My hero?

These seemed like questions that could only answered by my Gift. So I climbed down from the tree-slab and unlocked the door to the cabin, with the intention of, once again, writing in my sleep.

Elias 14

“Sir, are you okay?” The question stirred me from a syrupy sleep. A heavysset man in a postal uniform was standing over me with a concerned look on his face. I could hear water lapping nearby, and my clothes felt gritty. “Looks like you had a long night,” he said. “Trust me, I’ve been there. Been straight for four years now though.” He chuckled to himself, and his face was momentarily obscured by sunlight. “I remember waking up on this very same beach back in my twenties.” He knelt down close to my face, scooped up a handful of sand, and let it trickle through his fingers. “I also remember what it’s like to have some old fart yapping at you first thing in the morning, so I’ll shut up.” He stroked his chin and looked me over.

“What time is it?” I said. He checked his watch.

“8:13 in the AM. You need a ride somewhere?” I told him that I probably did. I managed to lift my torso and look around. I wasn’t as far from home as I’d feared— this was the beach that served as a social hub for families of the Paupackan Lake community, a modest, increasingly litter-strewn strip of sand about a seven-minute drive from the A-frame. I told the postman my address and walked with him past the port-o-potties and over to the parking lot. While I climbed into his van, painfully bumping my knee in the process, he continued speaking about his youthful debauchery. I caught about every sixth word. All I could think about during the too-slow car ride was getting back to the cabin and checking the top of the printer. There was a stack of papers waiting for me. There had to be. I bet the name I’d come up with for the Project videogame was excellent, something eye grabbing and mysterious. I couldn’t imagine what exactly it was, but I could preemptively sense the humming potency, and poetry it would exude. Those perfectly white papers sitting there,

waiting for me! Handled only with the careful, clean dexterity of my sleeping self, completely free of the smudges and bent corners that riddled most of my documents. I reached into my shirt to scratch my back and found I was sweating profusely in my agitation. It didn't help that the mail van was for some reason free of air conditioning.

“That ever happen to you?” asked the mailman.

“Never,” I replied, hoping this wasn't a compromising answer. He seemed satisfied with it and finished up his anecdote, which, from the snippets I'd caught, had something to do with a Bartender in New Haven, and an ex-best-friend. It was striking to me that he was oblivious of my situation. All he saw was a normal looking 20-something guy, seemingly hungover out of his mind. He had no idea.

He tried to launch into another story once he'd parked at the hill leading up to my property, but I thanked him before he could start, and got out of the car. “You take care of yourself,” came his voice from behind me. I could tell from his tone that my curtness had rubbed him the wrong way, but I was in no mood to stop and offer a polite apology. I hurried up the hill, the breeze cooling my back. I could practically smell the fresh paper, the fruits of a long night of hard work. I could feel the effects of this labor in the bags under my eyes, in the slight dizziness of my vision. This hike to the beach had been the instance in which I'd wandered the farthest from the cabin— did that mean I'd written more than ever before? Was this my *coup-de-grâce*? I ran into the house and was dismayed to see just one piece of paper atop the printer. No matter, I thought— writing this game was simply going to require patience. One page at a time. For now, I'd probably just get a title, and a brief abstract of the game, which was really all I needed to please Noah. But as I began to read, I was mystified. The writing seemed to have nothing to do with videogames at all.

The First Act of the Hive: Mion

When Firebringer comes to the doorstep with his faith shattered, let him not eat from the platter he once shirked. Rest. Rest for the dreaded freshened breath of silence. He is misunderstood. The path is much less complicated than we think, and yet, far more. Dragon flesh is worth a pint. Track the fissure of discontent. Eat from the halls of the oft-swung broadsword. If you think you are far apart, then you are. To swing shut is to allow forth the demons of stubborn regret; to push out is the imperative. Follow the winged beast to his shackled prisoners, and let the dark red come flowing forth— preternatural friendship, celebrations of the triage, bedmates rung wetly from the dust of time. You are the only one who flits.

Rayanna 11

It was early morning in mid-September. I was in my bedroom packing my bags for New York City when Olivia knocked on the door.

“There you are, Liv. What was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Actually this is something else. Noah’s friend is back,” she said.

“I told you your lover boy would return.”

“All I said was I thought he was cute... he seemed so put off by us, though.” She shut the door behind her. “I thought he was he was a one-timer for sure.”

“Guess not.”

“He says he wants to talk to you alone. He says it’s urgent.”

“Send him up.” She nodded, but hovered by the door. “Oh, what was the other thing?” I asked.

“It may be a longer conversation. But...” she bit her lip, clearly conflicted. “I wouldn’t mention it if there were more time to think about it... it’s Edgar.” As soon she said the name, discomfort wrapped its clammy fingers around the back of my neck.

“I thought he was going to stay out of our way. What’s he done now?”

“Nothing yet. Just sent me an Email. Said he missed us. Said he was planning on ‘dropping by.’”

“I don’t like that at all.”

“Yeah neither do I.” I could sense that Olivia had dreaded telling me this piece of information, and that she’d been feeling its stressful effects from the moment she’d read Edgar’s message. I wanted to make her feel less stressed; to pull her close and hug the anxiety from her hunched shoulders.

“Okay, well. We’ll deal with that when we deal with that,” I told her, calmly. “Send Eli up.”

She nodded and exited. A few moments later, Eli entered. He looked even paler than he had the day before, as though the small amount of sunlight his skin absorbed over the summer had dissipated over night. As before, he was wearing a leather jacket, and well-pressed khakis. His spindly fingers were pressed flat into the surface of a black folder he was holding, splayed out like crooked piano keys.

“Shit. I caught you heading out the door, didn’t I?” he said, eyeing my sweater, and the backpack on the bed.

“I’m in no rush.”

“Where are you going?”

“New York.”

“Right, always more recruiting to do, I’m sure,” he said. I remained quiet, not bothering to correct his assumption. He apologized for bursting in like this, then qualified his apology, saying he was sure there were plenty of comings and goings around here. He hoped it wasn’t too much of intrusion. There was something he wanted to show me.

“Or. I don’t know. Maybe it’s not worth it,” he murmured to himself.

“Okay.”

“I just want to preemptively say, before I show you this or I ask you anything, that I respectfully think your beliefs are... unorthodox.”

“Okay.”

“It’s nothing against you or the people here— honestly you were all very nice. But I just don’t want to give you the impression that my being here, or my telling you what I’m about to tell you means that... I just don’t want you to think that I’m joining your... group.”

He said this urgently, and with great difficulty. I could tell he was straining very hard to not come off as gruff or dismissive. He kept picking at the frayed corner of his jacket pocket.

“All right. Message received.” There was a moment of quiet. I heard Archie yawn loudly from downstairs.

“Reunions are weird,” said Eli. “Like... I know this isn’t first reunion, obviously there was yesterday. But yesterday I only saw you in the context of the big group, you know? So. Hi.” I reciprocated his greeting. He took off his jacket and folded it around his arm. His shirt looked damp with sweat. He smelled like sandalwood and mint gum. “Can I sit down?” I nodded and pulled the chair out from the desk for him. “I’m just not even sure what to make of this,” he said, under his breath.

“Eli. If you want me to force you to talk, then I’m sorry. I’m not going to do that.”

“Okay,” he breathed out loudly and placed his jacket on the back of his chair. “So yesterday during your speech, you mentioned something about receiving a vision from the Omni.” I nodded. “And you said it could happen to anyone, whether or not that person was part of the Empathy Project. What I’m going to tell you is something I’ve never told anyone.” He paused for dramatic effect. I met his gaze. Part of me suspected he was about to tell me the same story I’d been hearing from all of the Empathizers: he was going to say that after he’d heard me speak at the meeting, he’d had a vision from the Omni, that he’d woken up from a dream... and so on. But then there was also a part of me that was holding out for something different, something more significant than just another dream-scrap to add to the pile. I had hope for two reasons.

The first was that Eli was a curious combination of stranger and friend. I’d walked the same campus as him for two years, learned a lot about him through Noah, and had even spent time in his company, but he remained more or less unknown. Because of Noah’s

protectiveness, I'd felt pressure to remain distant from most other men during our college years; this went for Noah's best friends too. Noah would say it was because of my aversion to large social gatherings, but the truth was that he couldn't stand the possibility of my being interested in someone else. I never gave him any reason to believe I would abandon him, or that I found him boring. But this didn't stop him from obsessing over the idea that I was falling out of love with him. One of the many downsides to this was that never spent as much time around Eli as I might've liked. That isn't to suggest I felt some deep, illicit love for him (a fear of Noah's, as I discovered during one of our final arguments). He just seemed like someone worth getting to know. I liked what he had to say in group discussions, and he struck me as a good listener. I hadn't been sure which friends Noah would be able to convince to visit Allway, but I was glad Eli was the first to come.

The other reason I had hope was that, according to Noah, Eli had a history of sleep disorders. The only other person I'd known with such a history was my father.

"Right. Well, sort of. I have this... Gift. This ability that's hard to explain." He reached out and absentmindedly folded a crease in the corner of the bed's covers. Then he produced from the inner pocket of his jacket something small, black, and plastic. "Do you have a computer in here?" I nodded and withdrew my laptop from one of the drawers in the desk. "Really?" he said, surprised.

"You expected us to be Amish or something?" I said. He laughed and admitted that the thought may have crossed his mind. The laptop turned on with a soft metallic whirring noise and, without hesitation, he plugged in his flash drive.

* * *

“So... what? You’re a productive night-owl?” I asked him. On my computer screen, the video was frozen. His figure was on the floor in the middle of doing push-ups (if my eyes weren’t being deceived by the gloomy, green night-time setting). I was somewhat bemused, and wondered if this was some strange, backwards attempt at flirting or showing off. Did he think I was impressed?

“No, no, no,” he said. “You misunderstand. I wasn’t awake while I was doing that.” He fast-forwarded the video and we watched as he made himself breakfast, and sat typing at his computer. “I don’t remember doing any of this.”

“You were wasted.”

“Not at all. I mean come on. You saw the beginning of the video. You saw me sit down on that couch, totally fine. I was stone-cold.”

“Have you gone to a doctor?” He told me that he had been going to sleep specialists his entire life and they had done all they could for him. This wasn’t a disorder, anyway, he said. In fact it was something like the opposite.

“Every time I have something that I specifically need to write, I manage to get it done while I’m unconscious.”

“I’m jealous.” Even if what he was saying proved to be useless, it was at least something different than the usual story. I watched him hard, looking for signs that he’d let his sanity slip since our years in school together. Were his pupils more dilated than they should be? Were his fingers trembling? How fragile was he without Emma? The desire to gather knowledge that I’d sensed in him years before was the sort that can become dangerous if unchecked, if unfocused. I wouldn’t have been surprised if losing the structure of academic life had sent him reeling. If what he was telling me was true, than something remarkable had happened to Eli. But that was a big If. Casting himself as a gifted and

unlikely savior was the sort of thing I could see him doing. He was hungry. He'd always been hungry. He dug into the back of his jeans, producing from them the same notebook he'd been toting around the meeting yesterday. He removed a folded sheet of paper sticking out from its pages.

"I've written a lot of stuff while asleep," he said. "Pretty much all of it was related to that videogame I was working on. The one Noah and I were working about with the football...?" I answered his implied question by nodding sharply and telling him that yes, I had definitely heard all I needed to about their game. Eli went on. "But I get the feeling that if I'd had my Gift in school, I would've been able to use it for all sorts of assignments: essays, lab reports, whatever. Because it's pretty clear that using it has to do with someone else assigning me something to do. When Noah sent me here to see if I could come up with a videogame idea by watching the group... I consciously had no idea how to go about doing that, but I assumed that I would go home and my Gift would take care of it."

"I take it that's not what happened?" He hoisted himself from the chair and over to the bed, so he could sit beside me. He told me that I was right, and proceeded to unfold the piece of paper against his knee.

"This is what I wrote in my sleep last night. Somehow the 'assignment' that you issued to the group at that meeting must've taken priority over Noah's 'assignment.' I don't know why exactly. I haven't worked out what it is exactly that makes certain things happen and others, no. It just sort of works when it does, but I figured you'd want to know about it this time, since, according to your sermon, you've been waiting for this to show up." I read the passage twice through. It was a good length. It felt familiar, and was clearer than the dream-scrap. I sensed a narrative subtly arching through it, a story that needed deciphering. Was I looking at the doctrine? "I bet you've had a lot of people telling you that they've had

visions of the Omni, or special dreams or whatever. That was the sense I got, anyway. But then I figured, if you'd already found what you were looking for, you'd have told them to stop searching. So you must still be looking. I don't know if this is any more what you're after than the other Empathizers' dreams, but... I don't know it just seemed like too perfect of a coincidence not to at least mention it to you."

"Firebringer," I said aloud.

"Does that mean anything to you?"

The term had not appeared in any of my father's diaries, nor had he mentioned it in his sermons. His descriptions of the Omni would occasionally include mention of some of the elements, but never fire. Almost always they were characterized as "flowing through splendidly like water or wine." I read through the page once more and my mind snagged on the phrase "Dragon flesh is worth a pint." It was significant—my increased heart rate made that much clear. But how?

"What I wonder is how much of the doctrine this is," said Eli. "Is it going to be a full book? I don't know. I don't know if I want to spend my nights working on this project instead of one I'm more invested in." I was barely hearing him. There was an image burning freshly in my mind: a dragon staring right at me, its mouth agape. Perhaps it was green. No: black. Where had this image come from? A television show? A drawing? Eli started to say something but I cut him off, practically begged him to give me a moment to think.

"You look so stony-faced," said Eli. "Was it something I said?" I came close to yelling at him to stop talking, but before I could, the memory jolted through my mind.

"Edgar!" I said.

"What?"

"His house had a doorknocker that looked—"

“What?” Eli said, clearly overwhelmed.

“The whole time we were there he was puffing away at his cigar and playing with his lighter!” I vividly remembered the way Edgar’s robe had splayed out beneath him on his chair, like folded leather wings. “And the rest of it totally makes sense... Look: when the ‘Firebringer’ returns with his ‘faith-shatterers,’ right? The Apathetic Six!”

“I can tell this is obviously a very exciting moment for you. And I’m sure it would be for me as well, if I just knew what the hell was going on,” said Eli. Before I could say anything Olivia called through the door.

“Everything all right, Raye?”

“Come in here! I want to show you something.”

Elias 15

Olivia was wearing a low cut grey dress that dashed to pieces whatever lingering suspicions I still had that the practices or etiquette of the Empathy Project resembled in any those of the Amish. Her ears were adorned with wide silver hoop earrings and her lips popped brightly with hot red lipstick, removing something of the quiet innocence I'd projected onto her during our previous encounter. I felt a powerful urge to pull up a chair for her, but decided that this would come off as trying too hard. Raye, standing, gestured for Olivia to come and read over the slip of paper I'd brought. Both women gazed fixedly at the writing while I sat on the bed, rubbing my palms against my knees, and contemplating the significance of their intrigued glances. Occasionally one of them would read the words aloud but in that quiet, half-pronounced sort of way. Growing impatient, I stood and wandered over to the window, looked out into the wood I'd virtually bushwhacked my way through on the way to Allway. I felt a bit like a schoolboy whose essay is being reviewed by several teachers at once.

"I can't make any sense of this," Olivia finally said. For some reason, this comment irked me. Rayanna could find logic in my writing (even if I couldn't), so why couldn't Olivia?

"Are you sure it doesn't remind you of anyone?" asked Rayanna. "Someone we visited recently?" Olivia's eyes lit up and she grabbed the paper back.

"Edgar!" she said.

"Exactly! Edgar!" said Rayanna.

"Who is Edgar?" I yelled. I knew I was putting a damper on their moment of revelation with all my questions, but I was tired of feeling so excluded. Raye breathed out a little impatiently, but then calmly explained the details of Edgar's defection. She concluded

by recounting her and Olivia's visit to see him, and his claim that he was done with the Project. When she finished, she looked at me with satisfaction, as though I now knew all I needed to.

"Am I missing something?" I asked.

"Come on, Eli. It's *your* writing," said Raye, watching me with catlike intensity. "Look." She handed me back the piece of paper. "Wait, hold on. I'm going to make copies of this. I'll be right back." She promptly took the paper back and left the room. I sat down on the bed, suddenly hyper aware that I was alone in a large, unknown bedroom with a beautiful girl. Like any person suffering from this sort of hyper-awareness, I frantically searched for an interesting topic of conversation.

"Maybe you could just explain to me everything that's happening?" I said, hopefully.

"I think it's best if Raye lays out her theory for you," she said, taking a seat in the chair I'd vacated. She adjusted her white headband and glanced around the room. "This used to be Raye's father's room, you know?"

"Is that weird for you? Her being in here now?" I said. I inwardly cursed. This had sounded more combative and prying than I intended.

"I suppose it could be but... Raye decided that just letting it stay empty would make the Empathizers feel even more uncomfortable. And it didn't really seem right for anybody else to have Ron's old room. It just made sense." I glanced around the space. It was capacious and well lit, dominated by a four-poster bed, a roll-top desk, and an enormous shelf of books.

"Quite the reader, huh?" I asked, eyeing the bookshelf. "Unless... are those all Raye's?" Olivia replied that they were Ron's, and that yes, he had indeed been quite the reader.

“It sometimes overwhelmed me how often he would quote books. There were times when he would get through an entire conversation without using a single word of his own. It was always Hemingway this and Descartes that.” I stifled a smile at her mispronunciation of the latter. “Don’t get me wrong, their words were smart and helpful, it would just get to be too much sometimes.”

“What about Rayanna? Is she the same sort of... bookworm?” I asked. Olivia answered that, while Rayanna was incredibly book smart, she relied less on literary lessons than Ron had.

“That bit about Flatland was sort of an exception,” she said. “Normally her talks are just about nature.” I interpreted this as confirmation that the sermon had been specifically devised for my arrival. “She’s got this way of taking the ordinary world and making it seem like... new, and incredible, and beautiful. It’s not like she tries to enhance things, she just takes away all the boredom. Like she’ll point out a huge tree trunk you walked past every day of your life, and she’ll comment on the way the bark folds or something, and you’ll see, like really *see* the beauty that she’s talking about. And then every time you walk past that tree you remember how special it seemed in that moment.”

“Sounds like she does a lot of good for you,” I said. “You two been friends for a long time?” She nodded.

“We grew up together here. My Dad didn’t want to join the Project when my Mom brought me here, so Ron became kind of like a father figure to me, and Raye like an older sister. The two of them have taught me everything I know.” Her face reddened and I could tell she thought she had been gushing. I wanted her to gush, though. I found her wide-eyed allegiance to Raye quite endearing. I was going to ask her to talk about the period of time

when Raye left, but we were interrupted when the woman in question came bounding back into the room with several papers flapping in her hand.

“Okay, here we go. Sorry I took a second. I’ve already marked up the paper a little bit. Couldn’t resist,” she said, sweeping the curtains all the way open. She slid an aged wooden foldout table from beneath the bed and erected it between the three of us. She distributed two copies of the paper and then walked back to the shut the door behind her.

“Do you want me to go grab a chair for you?” asked Olivia, starting to get up.

“No that’s all right, I can stand,” replied Raye. She slowed her pace, breathed deeply, and fished several pens out of her desk drawer. She pressed her hands into the table in almost the exact same way that Noah had done during Gridiron Ghoul meetings. There was something more natural about her movements, however, something unconscious and elegantly sloppy about the authority with which she carried herself. I wondered if Noah had learned the movement from her, and futilely attempted to incorporate it into his own body language habits. I remained seated on the corner of the bed, the table within arm’s length, the text on my paper vivid, black, and perfect beneath the sun’s flat rays. I saw that some of the photocopied words were circled, and that there were already some hasty notes in the margin.

“All right. Let’s do some analysis. First I’ll... yes, Eli?” Rayanna broke off abruptly. I realized I’d been unintentionally letting my mouth open and close. “You’d like to say something?” I bit the inside of my cheek and looked away from her. “Is it that you want to leave?” I realized, as she said this, that I actually didn’t know if wanted to leave or not. A whole bundle of neurons fired from the “don’t get sucked in to this mumbo jumbo” side of my brain. But the force of this warning seemed silly and unwarranted when compared with my desire to understand my Gift. Here was someone assuming the utility and significance of

my abilities. It would have been a mistake to walk away without at least hearing what she had to say. Not to mention, the very idea of someone devoting analytical attention to my writing was downright flattering. “I completely understand if you want to go. Let me be clear. You’ve done your part by bringing us this message. Now it’s on me to interpret the message and deliver it to the Empathizers, but it’s not a requirement that you stay here. I wouldn’t want to subject you to our... unorthodox ways.” I settled back into my seat, and told her that I would stay. Just for a couple hours. I would indulge this mystic, conjectural analysis, if only as enjoyable practice in the fine art of bullshitting.

“Terrific.” She lowered her face to the paper, close enough to it that she looked as if she might be searching for a scent. “All right, I’ll walk you two through what I’ve already managed to figure out. So let’s start with the title: ‘The First Act of the Hive.’ that’s, I think, exactly what it sounds like. We, as Empathizers, are seeking to reach Hive Mind. So this paper represents the first step of our journey towards that goal. Just as Ron’s final statement predicted.”

“Simple enough,” said Olivia.

“In fact the only questionable thing about that interpretation is that it seems almost *too* clear,” Rayanna went on. “The same goes for the phrase ‘Mion’ which is an obvious scrambling of the word ‘Omni.’ We know that the Omni have always worked in mysterious ways, so I can only think that the transparency of this title is intentional. It must be there to dispel any confusion... which makes me think that time is of the essence. We’ve got to move quickly. Good so far?” Olivia and I both nodded. “Okay so you can see that the next word I’ve circled is ‘Firebringer.’ Olivia, you already know why I’ve gone and written ‘Edgar’ next to it, but I think walking Eli through it will actually help us unpack things a little bit. So, Eli.” She turned to me. “Where to start...” she cast her eyes around the room and

absentmindedly stroked a fingernail against her forearm. “Smoking has always been expressly forbidden in Allway. My father built it using extremely flammable materials. The no-smoking rule has never presented much of a problem, pretty much all of the Empathizers respect it.”

“Or, at least... respect the importance of not burning the place down.” I said.

“Right,” she said. “Only one person has ever challenged it.”

“Edgar, I’m assuming?” Olivia chuckled in a you-have-no-idea kind of way.

“It was one of the few things he and my father had tension about. Ron didn’t realize how flammable the place was until a couple years after building it. Once he did, he put the no smoking rule in effect right away: no smoking inside, and no smoking any nearer to Allway than 25 feet. But the problem was that Edgar joined the Project before the rule went into effect, so he thought he was above it. He would take out cigars in the middle of study sessions and start filling the basement with smoke, just trying to draw attention to himself.”

“Sounds like kind of a jackass,” I said. Olivia laughed. I felt a rush of endorphins.

“You could say that. Or you could say he was jealous of Ron. Always trying to get under his skin.”

“Okay I think I see where this is going,” I cut in. I felt a little annoyed at Rayanna for speaking for so long without providing a real opportunity to respond. “Edgar was the only smoker in the Empathy Project, so he’s your ‘Firebringer.’”

“That’s almost it,” said Rayanna. “But I wasn’t quite done. At a certain point, Edgar realized that he was really just making himself look like a fool, and that Ron wasn’t really taking the bait.”

“But Edgar was so desperate to get a reaction out of Ron that he took things even further,” said Olivia. “He started giving cigarettes to everyone, even kids, and being really mean to them if they refused.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“Then, just over a year ago,” said Raye. “One of the kids got hold of his matches and accidentally set a curtain on fire.” I grimaced. “Everyone survived, don’t worry. But only thanks to Ron and Archie.” I shifted the paper around with my fingertips, absorbing what they’d just told me. “Actually, come to think of it, that was a very similar accident to what happened all those years ago: the reason the rule went into effect in the first place, I mean.” Raye chuckled, thoughtfully.

“What, you mean a kid setting a curtain on fire?” I said. Raye nodded.

“A very mischievous kid indeed.”

“Who was it?” Rayanna glanced over at Olivia, who looked away, reddening.

“So you see,” said Raye, jabbing at the word “Firebringer” on her paper. “Edgar literally brought fire to Allway.”

“That makes a lot of sense. I mean if he was always smoking pipes and cigars, then I bet he also had a fancy lighter, like an old-school Zippo or something?” They both nodded. “Always waving around the flame for no reason?” Olivia excitedly said that was also true. I was proud to have gotten this reaction, I’d made an inference based purely on the behavior of the one other cigar smoker I knew: Avery. “So that’s another way he *literally* brought the fire,” I went on, feeling emboldened by my confirmed hunch. “He had fire with him in his pocket at all times. Yeah this guy seems to fit the bill. I mean, that said, my comprehension only means so much, given that I’ve never met Edgar...”

“Well if you stick around, you’ll apparently be meeting him soon enough,” said Olivia. Raye made a preoccupied, “hmm” sound. I looked at both of them inquisitively. Olivia explained that Edgar had contacted her and advised her of his plans to drop by Allway. “Probably this weekend,” she said. “That’s when the most Empathizers will be in

Allway, and if I know him, he'll want to have as big an audience as possible for his dramatic return.”

“Lucky me,” I said. “Okay, what’s next?” I scanned the paper in front of me. Raye’s handwriting bordered on illegible, scribbled with feverish momentum that’d sent the ends of her letters flying off the page.

“Well now that we’re settled on who Firebringer is, that makes the rest of this very easy to understand,” said Raye.

“Right,” I agreed. “You mentioned that when Edgar defected, he convinced some of the Empathizers to leave the project, right? So I feel like you’ve got your faith-shatterers right there.”

“The Apathetic Seven. Seems right to me,” said Olivia. Rayanna looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded and returned her gaze to her paper.

“Good. Moving on,” she said. That he will ‘come to the doorstep’— I think that’s also just what it sounds like. He’s going to return to Allway with some of the Apathetic. He’ll be expecting to be treated with our normal hospitality.”

“The Prodigal son,” I muttered.

“What?” said Olivia.

“Never mind.”

“What the doctrine advises us to do next is... to rest,” said Raye.

“Rest for the dreaded freshened breath of silence...” I read aloud, thoughtfully. “I’ll admit I’m at a loss with this one. You guys have any ideas?” There was a long silence. Olivia suggested, half-joking, that this passage meant we were supposed to take a nap for the sake of the Omni. A long an inconclusive discussion ensued. This particular phrase, it seemed, eluded all three of us, and we eventually decided to move on.

Rayanna 12

At 3:00 pm, I left Eli and Olivia to continue decoding the text. I'd considered calling Noah to cancel our dinner together, but I didn't want to deal with the fresh wave of complaints and desperation that would come thundering in my direction. The last thing that boy needed was another reason to wallow in his heartbreak. And I had promised to go see him, after all... I'd told him to bring me recruits and he had done so. Just like the dutiful go-getter that he was. Now I had to uphold my end of the deal.

I felt trapped. I knew it was partially my fault for promising him a visit in the first place, but I was still struck by the unfairness of the situation. Years after our breakup, and he was still demanding emotional labor of me. It was unpleasant. If I canceled, he would become miserable and hold me responsible. By if I kept my promise (but failed to fall back in love with him), well then I would be "leading him on," teasing him or something like that. No doubt he had some grand gestures in mind for me, an elaborate plan to win me back over the course of the evening. I knew well the patience, the appearance of mild enjoyment, the artful aloofness that were required of me in order get through the evening without triggering his anger or a lovesick soliloquy. I just wasn't sure I had it in me.

I pulled into a gas station to use the bathroom. Before I got out of the car, I checked my phone and saw that I had two missed calls from him, and a text that read: "you on your way?" I stared hard at these words. Something about them made me angry, and I didn't know why. Perhaps it was the sense of urgency lurking in their subtext, and the false disinterest this urgency tried to hide behind. The feeble apathy of non-capitalization doing nothing to conceal the eighty-decibel question: "WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU? DID

YOU LIE TO ME, YOU BITCH?” I decided not to respond. Before walking into the gas station, I turned my phone onto its “do not disturb” mode.

Elias 16

“Eat from the halls of the oft-swung broadsword,” I read from the paper. “Does that make you think of any of the doctrine’s traditions?”

“Not really,” said Olivia, tiredly. “Well I suppose it could be the... no.” I had the feeling that, while the doctrine was interesting to her, this sort of analysis was not something that she naturally enjoyed. Without Raye here to excitedly build on my ideas, the momentum was slowing. The epiphanies were becoming forced and infrequent. I didn’t like the idea that I was boring Olivia, or making her feel useless and dumb. I was about to suggest we take a break when she stood up.

“I’m going to get some fresh air,” she said.

“Oh. Yeah. Go right ahead.” I inwardly berated myself for not having suggested this first. I thought of offering to accompany her, but no: she could probably use a break from hearing my voice. If she’d wanted me to come with her, she would’ve invited me. With a tired, polite smile, she left the room. The door glided silently after her until it met its frame. The fit was imperfect, however, and it ricocheted back six or seven inches. It would seem the inflammability of Ron’s materials wasn’t his the only flaw in his craftsmanship. Curious, I began to scan the room for other architectural mishaps. Everything else seemed structurally sound, if a little slipshod. It was clear most of the furniture had been built hastily, and with an eye for pragmatism rather than aesthetic pleasure. The exception to this rule was the desk, a glorious mahogany piece that, were my knowledge of woodworking not so limited, I’d probably be able to describe in more exact terms than: sturdy, robust, and impressive. I ran my fingers across its smooth surface; I envisioned Ron doing this, and thinking of himself as the proud owner of a tried and true racehorse, a steed that he referred to in husky, cowboy

terms like “what a beaut.” I was in the habit of entertaining this brand of speculative vision, having spent so much time in the A-frame, imagining the thoughts of the previous tenants.

The front drawer of the desk was jutting out, disrupting the beautiful symmetry of this purebred. I pressed my thumb against the surface of the drawer, but it resisted my pressure. I placed both palms on it and firmly pushed, but to no avail. I yanked the drawer open to locate the source of the jam, and discovered an overstuffed manila folder. I gazed down at my find, my fingers itching to open it up. I jogged back to the door and poked my head out into the hallway, in case Olivia was coming back. It was quiet out there, just a long line of closed bedroom doors. The Empathizers were having breakfast, or doing Empathetic Interplay, maybe. I returned to the folder and opened it to find a large pile of variously sized papers. Across the inner side of the folder, Raye had written the phrase “dream-scrap.” I leafed through the papers, finding that each one was written in a different handwriting, and that many bore titles like “my dream” or “Omni vision?” Looking down at these hopeful tidbits, I couldn’t help feeling a little satisfied. Here were the previous attempts at a doctrine. The Empathizer’s search for validation was laid bare before me, and it was... adorable. How easy it had been for me to do what they’d been struggling to do. The irony of it all! The absurdity! That I, me, Eli, an outsider –someone who barely knew or cared about their belief system– would be the one to come along and present the doctrine they’d been desperately attempting to squeeze out of themselves. It was a little sad, actually.

I continued thumbing through the crumpled pages, and discovered, at the bottom of the stack, six or seven scraps clipped together. Raye had marked them with a post-it note that read: “Solasu Dreams.” Each of the “Solasu Dreams” followed a similar pattern, and each was heavily annotated with red pen. These pages bothered me, but I felt better when I saw how many of the annotations ended in question marks. I took these marks as a sign that

Solasu was a dead end, just like the rest of the scraps. Raye must have discerned as much. That's why she was taking my writing seriously.

But what if she had doubts? What if she insisted on returning to Solasu's spurious suggestion of a doctrine? She might make the mistake of investing time and energy into the futile act of disentangling these false documents, time and energy she could otherwise be using to understand Mion. I gripped the top corner of the paper-clipped stack. My hand shook slightly. Perhaps it was better to remove the possibility of a distraction. From downstairs there came a shout and the sound of breaking glass.

"Calm down!" yelled a man's voice. Without thinking, I shoved the manila folder back into the drawer and slammed it shut. I waited, listening. "What a welcome this is." The same voice said. Another voice gave a heated reply, but I couldn't make out what it said. It took me a few moments to convince myself that the loud noises weren't directed at me, that I hadn't been caught red-handed. When my heart rate slowed a bit, I left the room with my copy of Mion and began to quietly descend the stairs.

"All I wanted was just catch up with some folks," the man's voice was saying. "Now that I've been greeted with such hostility, I see that this was a fool's errand. In Ron's day the Project's leaders would never treat an Empathizer so cruelly."

"Stop talking like that. I know why you came," said Olivia's voice, angrily. As I emerged from the stairs into the living room, I saw that she was standing face to face with a bearded, heavysset man. Her eyes were narrowed and her chin was raised defiantly in his direction. "You are not welcome here," she said. I glanced down at my copy of Mion and felt a new rush of adrenaline. The Firebringer must have arrived. Sooner than Olivia had conjectured, true, but nothing about the timeframe was mentioned in Mion. The prophecy was intact, now it was our job to continue abiding by it. I wondered how easy it would be to

rally the Empathizers and dispel with this intruder as a group. Ten or eleven of them had already surrounded the pair, drawn by the sound of the argument and the breaking glass. The carpet beneath Olivia was glinting with the remains of whatever had been fractured.

“Are you all just going to stand there and let this girl bully me? She throws a vase at my feet and that’s fine by you all?”

“That was an accident,” interjected Olivia.

“Am I such a stranger to you now?” he continued. He spread his arms wide in an appeal to the room. More Empathizers, meanwhile, were trickling in from the front-yard, and basement. “I’m gone a few months and I come back to find all my friends turned against me. Some loyalty, old pals. I see what a mighty fine job Ron’s daughter has done to you all. Turned you all into a pack of violent servants and fear-mongers. If Ron could see you now.”

“Raye is a better leader than you could ever be, Edgar,” yelled Archie, coming forward from the crowd. Edgar laughed condescendingly and laid a hand on Archie’s shoulder. Archie immediately recoiled. Olivia, meanwhile, began tapping her cellphone furiously. She pressed it to her ear and I could hear her saying, “come on, Raye. Pick up...”

“Oh is she not answering her phone?” said Edgar. “Where is she now? Nobody knows,” he sang, turning his palms to the ceiling. “Really... Nobody knows?” He raised his hands even higher. This guy was already starting to irritate me. “So she’s not here, and no one knows what she’s doing or when she’ll be back. Hmm I don’t know how you define ‘good leader,’ Arch, but I’d bet it’s—”

“Shut up!” said Archie. He looked wounded and angry.

“Maybe we should hear him out,” offered one of the Empathizers.

“Now that’s terrific suggestion,” said Edgar. “That’s the sort of hospitality I remember finding at Allway.” He gave a satisfied nod.

“It seems wrong to turn him away without letting him speak,” said another voice. I identified it as coming from the white haired woman with the fanny pack. “What if we let him stay for dinner?”

“I do have quite an appetite,” said Edgar.

“No. Raye doesn’t want him to stay,” said Olivia, looking increasingly flustered. She was sending a frantic text.

“How do you know?” asked the hacker, Charles.

“Because she... she told me,” said Olivia.

“She told you to make Edgar leave if he came to Allway?” asked the white-haired woman, skeptically.

“In a way,” said Olivia. She was tugging at her hair, agitatedly. I wanted to join the circle and offer her my support, but what good would that do? I was still a stranger, a newcomer to these people.

“In a way? What does that mean? And would you mind not texting while I’m talking to you?” snapped Edgar. Then he laughed too loudly. “I’m sorry but this whole thing is just a little bit ridiculous. I feel as though I’ve walked in on a group of high schoolers. I guess that would make you the teacher’s pet.” His gaze fell on Olivia.

“Don’t talk to Olivia that way!” said Archie.

“Do you have to yell everything you say?” said Edgar. “I’m standing right in front of you. Quit your barking.”

“Or what?”

“Look. Treat me like some big menace all you want, I’m not the one screaming and breaking vases.”

“I said that was an accident!” said Olivia.

“I came here with the intent of having a very calm and rational discussion with all of you, to try to offer you all some help. But it seems my warning might be coming too late.” He tapped his foot and brought a cigar out of his pocket, lit it, inhaled. “The truth is I know exactly what’s been going on around here. You may think I’m gone but I still hear things. I know everything that happens at Allway.”

“Get to the point,” said Archie.

“Patience is a virtue, my friend,” said Edgar. I had a strong urge to step forward and slap the cigar out of his hand. “Rayanna has led you to believe that you’re all going to get to Hive Mind together. But we know perfectly well from Ron’s teachings that every person goes through his own journey to get there. Have you forgotten this so quickly after his death?”

“You mean his Ascen—” started Olivia.

“Such short term memories!” bulldozed Edgar. “You would believe the most illogical schemes if you thought it meant you were important. I’m here because I cannot watch this from the sidelines anymore. You are grouping yourselves around someone who doesn’t know what she’s doing. I cannot distance myself from it any longer. It’s been weighing too heavily on my conscience: this... this fear of mine. This horror in the face of what this group will become if you continue to follow a girl that is desperately clinging to one idea and then the next, searching for some revelation that cannot be sought. There is only one direction the Project can go if you continue like this. And it is toward violence and hatred. She will hurt you in her ignorance. She will fill you with resentment and confusion. She will lead you down the very path that her father, when he was still of sound mind, would never have wanted for us. Let us return to the simplicity of what the Empathy Project used

to stand for, when we trusted in the daily practices, and the art of listening, and didn't go on a wild goose chase for a doctrine we barely knew anything about."

I was confused. How did Edgar know about the doctrine? From what Raye and Olivia had told me, he'd stayed at a distance from the Project ever since Ron's passing... so how did he know the details of Raye's leadership? Or was he simply pretending? Piecing together the little he'd heard into an imagined narrative? Taking educated guesses to project an air of omniscience? I was both fascinated and deeply repelled by this man. He had an almost royal elegance about him, coupled strangely with a semblance of rot. Watching him was like watching ants feasting on something freshly dead. "Don't worry, Olivia darling. I will not be staying long. Unless, of course," he cast an eye toward the white-haired woman "You wish me to stay for dinner." He winked. "But the purpose of my visit is very simple. I would like to open my doors wide to those of you who remember what the Project used to be. With me, there will be no promises of doctrines. We will work daily to listen to each other. And that will be the end of it."

"That doesn't sound so bad," admitted the white-haired woman.

"Raye does not make empty promises!" said Olivia. "You would know that if you'd stayed but you never even gave her a chance." Her face was red with fury and her fingers were tightening into fists. It suddenly occurred to me that the broken vase might not have been an accident after all. "The doctrine is not just an empty promise."

"Oh is that right? She's managed to whip something together?" His voice dripped with sarcasm. "A little 'how to get to Hive Mind' checklist? Number one: say a prayer to the Omni every night and morning?"

"You're really asking for it, Edgar," mumbled Archie.

“Number two: perform a dance in the Omni’s honor. Number three: run around Allway three times while shouting the names of the stars,” Olivia was edging nearer and nearer to him and her lip was trembling with fury. “Number four: clap ten times, number five: only eat apricots for breakfast. The Omni love apricots. Number five: sing the alphabet backwards while hopping on one foot. The Omni say skip. The Omni say gallop. The Omni say everybody kiss each other. The Omni say draw blood. The Omni say take off all your clothes and—”

“—The doctrine is real,” said a woman’s voice from behind me. Everyone turned to face the front door.

“Raye!” said Olivia. The door swung slowly shut behind the cult leader.

“You have quite the flare for dramatic entrances, my friend,” said Edgar. He was clearly taken aback, trying to cover up his surprise with a layer of irony. “No one knew where you were, and now here you are at the perfect moment. Just really superb work.” He clapped melodramatically. “But how long were you skulking outside that door? Was all your waiting worth it?” Raye walked to Olivia’s side and placed a hand on her shoulder. Olivia exhaled deeply and looked as though she wanted to hug Raye.

“You know how I know the doctrine is real?” asked the dark-haired woman.

“I’m waiting on bated breath.”

“I know that it’s real because it predicted this,” she said, gesturing toward the whole room.

“What? The weather?”

“No.”

“This very situation? Well that’s awfully convenient.” He frowned at the end of his cigar. Then he produced his zippo and struck it against his jeans. His face glowed in the

relative darkness of the room. “And I suppose it told you what I was wearing, too? Tell me, what did the Omni have to say about my khaki pants? Too formal?” He re-lit the end of the cigar. “What about my coat?” He flapped open his jacket languidly and blew smoke. I couldn’t figure out why he was being so crass and irreverent if he was trying to win back the faith of the Empathizers. I watched the others’ faces carefully, looking for signs that they took offense to his comments. Several cringed, but most of them seemed simply awe-stricken.

“Nothing about your outfit, no,” said Raye.

“So what then?”

“Why don’t I show you?” she reached into her pocket and withdrew her copy of Mion. Many of the Empathizers whispered to one another as she unfolded the paper. Edgar swung his head back and forth, listening to the whispers. He looked confused for a moment. Then he beamed suddenly.

“They had no idea?” He laughed the same forced laugh, and stomped his foot. “You haven’t told anyone but your little sidekick here? The girl-squad’s been keeping secrets?” He wasn’t here to recruit, I realized. At least, not primarily. Not directly. What he really wanted to do was humiliate. He’d come with the intent of exposing Raye as an imposter, as a try-hard, as a child. He was trying to get a tantrum out of her. That was why he was being so directly disrespectful. Raye stood still for a long time, staring at the paper in her hands. “Well if you’re not going to read that thing, I mean if we’re gonna’ stand around in silence... perhaps we could *eat* something in the meanwhile? As I mentioned before you’re ever-so-subtle arrival, I’m really quite ravenous. I’ve got the darnedest hankering for Archibald’s penne alla vodka.” He mad a small bow in Archie’s direction. “Please tell me you’re still the

chef. Tell me at least that much hasn't changed." Archie blatantly ignored Edgar and pointed towards the document in Raye's hand.

"Raye what is it?" he asked.

"Is that the one I wrote?" said someone else.

"Quiet," said Raye, and the Empathizers obeyed. She read from the doctrine:

"The First Act of The Hive: Mion." The whispers immediately returned, and I heard one or two gasps. I couldn't help but feel proud that my words could incite such a reaction. I did suspect, however, that Raye was going to avoid giving me credit for having written Mion. Not now, anyway. What with her leadership being called into question, she needed to do everything to make herself significant. I understood why she would have to centralize herself, even if it bothered me.

"When Firebringer comes to the doorstep with his faith shatterers," she began, silencing the room again. "Let him not eat from the platter he once shirked." I noticed that Edgar, whether consciously or not, pocketed his lighter.

"Is that it?" said Edgar.

"No, there's more. Did you bring anyone with you?"

"What does it look like?" he gestured toward either side of him. "What? No faith shatterers? Well go on then. What's next?" He licked his lips, hungrily. He was still attempting to maintain a slick, apathetic demeanor, to turn the whole enterprise of the doctrine into some frivolous indulgence, but his curiosity was getting the better of him. He really did want to know what came next. He peeked over the top of her paper and scanned the upside-down words.

"Rest" he recited. "Rest for the dreaded freshened breath of silence.' Now what the blazes is that supposed to mean?" Everyone turned to look at Raye. I cursed quietly.

Perhaps she had come up with an interpretation during her drive? I'd been turning the phrase over in my head since the three of us had first discussed it. Its significance kept drawing near and then vanishing. Rest. Rest for the dreaded freshened breath. The three of us had early on settled on the idea that this first (repeated) word was an imperative in both instances. It commanded its reader, its audience to prepare for the 'deadened freshened breath...' But what if the word wasn't a command after all?

Raye, meanwhile, still hadn't made any sort of reply. I was worried that her silence was going to embolden Edgar further still. I was unsure if I'd be able to tolerate another one of his monologues, and I was completely sure that Olivia would snap if he did. I raised my copy of *Mion* to my eyes.

"Well?" demanded Edgar. "That's as far as our divine Interpreter can take us? Shame. There's so much more here."

"It means it's time for you to retire, Edgar," I said, stepping into the light. "Rest for the dreaded freshened breath. It's not an imperative, 'Rest' is a noun, and 'for' is used in the sense of 'suited the purposes of' not 'in preparation'"

"Um... okay," said Edgar.

"And what does that 'rest' really connote? Well let's see. You've been flirting with retirement since you left the Project, but now you're trying to get your toe back in the door, you're worried that a slow, restful life is going to be boring for you. But the Omni have written to remind you that rest is exactly what you need."

"S'cuse me son but just who the hell are you?" he asked me. I plowed onward, feeling no small satisfaction in being rude to him.

"It's an allocation of duties. *Action* is necessary for the Empathizers. But for those who have proven themselves unfaithful, those who have *shattered* the faith— well all that's left

for them to do, all that's left for you to do, Edgar. Is to get some rest. You're lost to the Project now that you left. You're completely out of touch with how it works now, distant to its practices and sensibilities, *dreaded* by the Empathizers. But you came back in that nice suit jacket, cleaned yourself up a little, *freshened your breath*, maybe in the hopes that you would be greeted by raucous applause but instead you've been met with—"

"Oh would just shut the fuck up already?" said Edgar. The room went dead quiet. "Look I'm sorry to speak that way but you are boring me senseless. Someone please tell Joe College to scram."

"This is Eli, and he's right about the doctrine," said Raye. She gestured for me to come to her and Olivia's side. With the three of us in formation, standing there with our identical texts, I felt like I was part of a bizarre, under-rehearsed school play. I was strongly tempted to add a spunky "yeah!" to the end of Raye's thought, and perhaps point a finger-gun skyward, but I contented myself to nod and hold my position.

"Why does Eli already know about the doctrine?" asked the white-haired woman. A couple of other Empathizers' murmurs suggested that they too were wondering this.

"Because he wrote it," said Raye.

Rayanna 13

I'd hoped to wait a little while longer. My plan had been to give Eli a chance to assimilate into the group. Then, I thought, it would be easier to share the doctrine with everyone. I knew that even though the Empathizers had been willing to accept the possibility of an outsider being the Conduit, many of them were still resistant to the idea. In their minds, being contacted by the Omni was a true honor, one that a dedicated member of the Project was much more deserving of than some unknown. So I'd hoped to wait. But, of course, Edgar had forced my hand in the way only Edgar can. And just as he must have been hoping for: the room erupted with questions.

“When did this happen? How long has the doctrine been written?”

“What does the doctrine say about me?”

“Who is the real Interpreter?”

“What?”

“Does this make anyone else uncomfortable?” And so on.

“Relax, everyone.” I yelled. Edgar looked mildly perturbed as they all fell quiet. “I will answer all of your questions. If you are all calm, and if you ask your questions with the intent of finding a solution, rather than rousing rabble, then we will be able to progress quickly and efficiently.”

“You sound like your father,” said Edgar. I ignored him.

“Now. Everyone have a seat. We'll work through this like adults.” The Empathizers all hesitantly lowered themselves onto the couches. A few reclined against the walls, and a few sat cross-legged on the plush rug. Only Eli, Olivia, Edgar, and I remained standing. And after a beat, Olivia too lowered herself to the ground. Edgar looked shoved his hands in his

pockets, looking uncomfortable. “If you have a question, please raise your hand. And while I’m addressing someone’s question, the rest of you, be sure to listen. You may, in fact, be wondering the same thing. Now, Agnes. It sounded like you wanted Eli to tell us what the Omni looked like in his vision, is that right?” Agnes nodded vigorously. “A perfectly valid question, and a terrific place to start. What *did* the Omni look like, Eli?” I looked over at him. His jaw fell open and he stuttered for a few seconds. “Right. The reason Eli can’t give us an answer is because he didn’t have a vision. Now before you start whispering that the doctrine he wrote is false, or that he is not the Conduit, consider this fact: Eli can write in his sleep.” I paused, expecting someone to voice disbelief, bewilderment, or fury. But no one spoke. Even Edgar seemed reluctantly intrigued. “It is a rare gift, and one that unfortunately does not belong to any member of the group. But it is no accident that Eli ended up here with us. It’s not just chance that made it so an old friend of mine was the one to receive this power from the Omni. Someone familiar to me, yet just unfamiliar enough that I would have to stretch my attentiveness and empathy to their limits in order to find him. The Omni chose him for a reason. I trust him. And you should too. You should also trust in his abilities, since, as we know, the sleeping mind is the one the Omni are most able to communicate with. Now, I heard someone ask a question about the identity of the Interpreter.

“Yeah,” said Xavier, raising his hand, and scratching at his hairline with the other. “That was me. I was wondering. You said you were the divine Interpreter, right? Like you were the one who would... like...”

“Interpret the doctrine?” I offered.

“Exactly,” said Xavier. He readjusted his position from cross-legged to sitting on his knees. “So how come Eli was the one who explained what ‘rest for the dreaded’ means?”

“Eli was just repeating what I had already told him. His analysis was what I had already decided on. He only heard it because I interpreted his doctrine in front of him.” I glanced over at Eli as I said this. He caught my eye and looked down at his shoelaces. I had hurt his feelings. His analysis had been excellent (and accurate, I believe) but it was imperative that the Empathizers understand our distinct roles. He had given me no other choice.

“So Eli wrote it. But you’re the one interpreting it for us?” asked Xavier.

“Yes. He is the Conduit. By thinking of him as the Interpreter, you misunderstood him.” I said. “And look at what the very next line of the doctrine is.” I held out Mion and Xavier’s eyes lit up.

“He is misunderstood,” he declared. “Guys, that’s what the next part of the doctrine says: ‘He is misunderstood!’” More excited whispers filled the air. Xavier smiled pensively and said he thought this all made sense. Someone else asked how long I’d been keeping the doctrine a secret.

“Raise your hand, remember?” scolded Agnes. “I mean geezum crow, do you want her to finish reading it or what?”

“Sorry,” said the voice, and this time I located it as belonging to Franz. “Just feeling a little in the dark is all.” He dutifully raised a slender hand and, once I had called on him, repeated the question.

“Eli only brought me the doctrine this morning. I would’ve told you sooner if I didn’t have urgent business in the city to attend to.” Edgar rolled his eyes and mumbled the words “urgent business” under his breath. I was growing tired of him. Why couldn’t he just sit down and listen like the rest of them? I wished he would leave of his own accord. But I knew that’s not how the Omni wanted it to happen.

“Any other questions?” I said.

“Read the doctrine, Raye!” said Agnes, after a pause.

“Go on then!”

“Yes! What comes next?” I read the next line of the doctrine.

“Well, what’s that supposed to mean?” said Edgar. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Eli’s paper shaking slightly. I was sure he was bursting to explain the sentence in question. But of course, he must have also realized that he no longer could be the one to reveal the meaning of the text. Olivia drummed her nails against the floor. I looked at her, then over at the window, where a bird shot past as though from a rifle.

“Well?” repeated Edgar. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. His reptilian eyes bore into me, betraying his interest.

“This line is clear enough. It warns us against overthinking,” I told the Empathizers. “The Omni caution you to not question them too much. The man that questions is the man that lacks blind faith. And blind faith is required to join Hive Mind. This tells us to go with our gut instinct. Xavier, what was your gut instinct when he arrived?” I gestured toward Edgar. Xavier pawed at his chin in thought.

“I was uncomfortable,” he said.

“Did you want him to leave?” I asked.

“I felt uncomfortable too,” said Becca, a Sympathizer that Xavier had recently invited to Allway.

“Me too,” said someone else. With each comment, Edgar seemed to shrink, as though undergoing some reverse metamorphosis. Watching this was immensely satisfying.

“Did you want me to leave, Xavier?” shouted Edgar, with an angry grin. “You know, Rayanna here would really like it if you said that. Don’t you know that would make her day?”

You'd be playing right into her hands. Making her fucking day. What's the matter, Xavier? You getting more uncomfortable?" He stooped down to Xavier and talked to him from about a foot away. Xavier tucked a clump of hair beneath his baseball cap and mumbled that Edgar should back off. "Or else what, Xavier? Or nothing, you little pussy."

"Edgar, leave it," I warned him. If Edgar laid a hand on this innocent teenager I was going to break his fingers.

"Just take it easy, man," said Eli, trying to sound casual.

"I bet your Dad didn't teach you to fight before he left Allway, but then again he was a little pussy too. He never would have made it to Hive Mind even if he tried, even if he had stuck around, the Omni would have told him that he was pathetic, just like his son."

"I said back off, old man," said Xavier, standing up. Edgar righted himself. The adolescent was thin but stood a full head taller than Edgar.

"Guys, relax," said Eli.

"What is going on?" screamed Agnes.

"Quit your whining!" Edgar told her.

"Edgar you're embarrassing yourself," I said.

"Shut your dumb mouth, little girl."

Olivia stepped forward and punched Edgar cleanly across the jaw. He stumbled, righted himself, and squeezed his lower lip between his fingers, wincing. A dark red blotch appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"You bitch," he spat. I held an arm in front of Olivia's heaving chest. She looked hungry for more. Edgar contorted his features in fury; his skin looking more wrinkled and cratered than before.

“Go home, Edgar,” I told him. He lunged forward but Xavier grabbed hold of his shoulders. Edgar tore himself from the young man’s grip. Before I could intervene, Eli strode past me and helped Xavier pin Edgar’s arms to his sides.

Elias 17

I was never much of a fighter. My premature growth spurt, pallid skin, and penchant for staying inside during recess meant that I managed to avoid the sort of physical conflict most urban public-schoolers experience at one point or another. The bullies avoided me both because they were slightly intimidated by my size, and, I think, because they were worried something was seriously wrong with me. There's the kind of grade school victim that'll cry and run to the nurse's office if he gets shoved into the pavement, and then there's the kind that will snap if you take his baseball cap. The sort of child that reacts to his small-bodied assailants the way the clinically insane react to being dragged from their houses, the way a revolutionary reacts to being gassed by the henchman of tyranny, the way the brokenhearted behave in Lifetime Original Movies. This is the sort of kid that bullies are likely to dub: "Not to be fucked with." It isn't that they hold respect for this strange, overdeveloped youth, but rather that their parents warned them to stay away from "that *quiet* boy." Or perhaps the bullies themselves intuited the danger of toying with someone who seems like he's perpetually one stolen lunchbox away from losing his shit.

I'm fairly certain that's how I was perceived.

As an adolescent r too, no one seemed particularly keen on pressing me to the point of violence. I don't know if I should feel proud or embarrassed by that fact. I do sometimes wish that I had had the experience of doing more roughhousing as a kid. I had no big brother to wrestle over chores with, nor a father who pressured me into kickboxing classes, nor a best friend who was willing to sock me in the jaw just so I could find out what it felt like. But there were plenty of things that made me angry, that made me want to fight like Jaden Chaos.

Like, for instance, when older men talked down to me. It filled me with livid adrenaline. Perhaps it was the relative stability of the economy in their day, or the relative validity of the pick-oneself-up-by-one's-bootstraps American ideal, or the relative rigidity of the racist, sexist, ableist status quo, but something about growing up in the United States of their childhood made male (especially white) baby boomers the most insufferably confident creatures to swagger their way into the twenty-first century. They were just so goddamn sure of themselves. With each pronouncement of: "These kids spend all their time with their noses in their phones," "Well everyone's gone through some setbacks in their life," and "Nothing was handed to me on a silver platter," I wanted to give another kick to their collective, historically covered, socioeconomically privileged asscheeks. I mean did he really think he was being revolutionary when he pointed out the technological obsession of millennials? Did he think he was seeing something no one else had? Because he sure as hell made it sound that way. As a young white man, I was, of course, given opportunities because of the very cultural conditions that fueled their fortune and egotism. I was not ignorant to this fact. Nor was I ignorant to the ways in which I inadvertently took after my forerunners. But the self-awareness and decent sense of self-doubt that I've grown up to possess are not a replication of, but a reaction to, overwhelming boomer certainty.

It would be a mistake to interpret this as an archetypical assault-on-all-parents, or an assault-on-all-Dads (here one senses the ghostly, prying hands of Freud, one of the most insidious man-splainers of all, attempting to disrobe this theory of mine as nothing more than generic neurosis). In fact, there are boomers, like my own father, who deserve credit for being a contemplative, rather than brazen, know-it-all. His brand of condescension rankled all right, but it could never rival that of men typified by Edgar. Edgar, who sneered knowingly at everyone. Edgar, who laughed during intellectual disputes, not because

something was funny, but because he had to demonstrate how obvious his understanding was. Edgar who left the Project. Edgar who thought he would lead a movement. Who came back to throw a hissyfit when it didn't happen. Who was desperately bullying everyone in sight so he didn't have to think too hard about his own shortcomings. This was the kind of man that made me want to throw a punch.

"You're completely out of control," I told him, holding his fist tightly against his hip. Xavier, meanwhile, was attempting to put the older man into a headlock.

"You get your hands the fuck off of me!" Edgar yelled.

"This is insanity!" someone screeched.

"All of you guys, cut it out," said Rayanna sternly. She and Olivia were moving forward, clearly looking for an opening in which to tear the three of us off of each other. Xavier must have loosened his grip too much because Edgar was able to slip his head out, and shove the teenager back into the crowd of Empathizers. I couldn't see from where I was standing, but I heard a yelp of pain and a dull thud, so I assumed Xavier had barreled into someone, and then into the wall. Edgar's willingness to hurt someone so much younger than him appalled and distracted me. He ripped himself away from my grasp, but before he could get too far, I stepped forward and thrust my fist directly into his ribcage. As though by an unconscious reaction, his elbow came flying upward and toward my face. I had just enough time to admire the beautiful trajectory of this weapon, to almost envision the tiny dotted line arcing from his joint to my temple before the lights went out.

Rayanna 14

Eli hit the ground hard. And he stayed down. Edgar stood clutching at his side while angry murmurs swept through the room. All the Empathizers were back on their feet.

“Get the Firebringer out of here,” demanded Agnes.

“Bug off!” someone else urged him. By behaving violently, my father’s old right-hand man had proven himself unsaveable, beyond the realm of mercy or empathy. No one would defend him now.

“Life outside the Project has not treated you well, Ed,” muttered Franz, sadly.

“He needs to leave. Just like the Omni said,” said Xavier, leaning on several Empathizers for support.

“Go home, Edgar,” I said, looking down at his hunched form.

“You’re all fucking crazy,” he yelled in a pained voice. “You make it so everything people assume about us is true. You’re a cult. A fucking.... cult. A group of idiots just waiting for someone to come along and hand you the Kool-Aid.” He started backing away, back towards the foyer. “Well guess what? I’m not going to be there when it happens. I’ve got my own Project now.” Throwing open the door, he feebly brought the cigar back to his lips. “I’m not bothering with you anymore. You’re past the point of help, and there are others who need my attention.” Olivia started to ask him what he meant by this, but he had already stepped onto the porch and slammed the door shut behind him. I heard him yelling to himself as he hobbled down the wooden steps of the porch and made his way back to his car. The Empathizers stood and listened in near-silence. The loudest sound in the room was Xavier’s still-ragged breathing. I waited to hear Edgar start his car. Instinctively, I knew what had to happen next, but I couldn’t yet articulate to myself just why it had to happen.

“I need a beer,” said Olivia. “Anyone else need a beer?” Xavier raised his hand.

“I know it’s not technically allowed,” said the teenager, “but—” I waved a hand, dismissing his question. Underage drinking had gone historically in and out of style under Ron’s leadership. I’d been asked several times where I stood on the matter, and refrained from giving an answer. Now was not the moment. Olivia went into the kitchen and, after a second, Xavier followed her. I crouched and checked Eli’s breath.

“Is he all right?” called out Sammy.

“Just out cold. Agnes, can you check on him when he wakes up?” Agnes nodded fervently. “And Archie.” I said. “Can you and Franz—”

“On it,” said Archie. He and Franz grabbed hold of Eli and lifted him onto the nearest couch.

“Excellent. Now listen to me, everybody. A lot has been happening tonight. But this isn’t over yet. The next part of the doctrine tell us that—” I heard the sound of Edgar’s car started up and abruptly pulling out of the gravel driveway. I interrupted myself to tell Archie to run to his car. “Right now. Go, go, go!” I said. Archie, who had been easing Eli’s head onto the arm of the sofa, accidentally let it slip. There was a dull thump.

“Shit.” he said. “Okay. Where am I going?” He slapped at his pockets. “Where’s my key?” He ran around frantically, dodging Empathizers, and sliding his hand across the tops of bookshelves. “Where’s my flipping key?”

“Where are you going?” asked Olivia, coming back into the room with a glass of beer.

“I don’t know. Where am I going?” Archie bellowed.

“Where’s he going?” Franz wanted to know.

“He’s going to follow after Edgar,” I told them. “We’re going to follow him back to where he’s been staying. I think it’s where he’s keeping the Empathizers he stole from us. I think that’s what he meant by ‘my own Project.’”

“Here, Arch. Take my car,” said Olivia. She tossed him her keys. He ran to the foyer and grabbed his jacket off a hook. “Why do we need to follow him though? Isn’t he still living with his sister?”

“I don’t think so. I think he’s been having meetings somewhere else. Somewhere he doesn’t want us to know about. I think he’s been trying to create a group to overpower us.” Archie had frozen by the front door, listening. “Go, Archie! Go now!”

“Sorry!” he said, hurtling out of Allway.

“Wait, so why would he go there now if he knows we’re following him?” said Olivia.

“Shit. You’re right. Wait! Archie,” I said. He stuck his head back in view.

“What?”

“Come back.”

“Okay,” he said, clearly winded. I thought hard. My hands were trembling with adrenaline. Impulsively, I took out my phone to check the time. I had thirteen missed calls from Noah.

“Wait no. Go back by the door,” I told him.

“All right.”

“What car is Edgar driving? Is it his pickup?”

“Yes,” wheezed Archie.

“Perfect. How far has he gotten?” Archie stepped outside for a moment.

“He forgot to open up the gate. He’s stopping now to open it up.”

“Good. Wait until he’s about to get through. Then run and put your phone in the back of his car. Don’t let him see you’ve done it.”

“I... what?” he managed.

“Just do it!”

“Okay!” he raced out of the front door. “Hey Edgar!” I heard him yell. “Hey Firebringer, don’t you want to come back and gloat some more!” The Empathizers listened in silence as the vehicle accelerated. There was the sound of metal clanging against metal, and then the mechanical whirring faded into the night. Archie appeared at the door, wincing as he clutched at his elbow.

“What has that son of a goat done now?” asked Agnes.

“Nothing. This is...” panted Archie. “Just tripped. I’m fine.”

“Did you get your phone in his car?” I asked him. He nodded. “And Edgar didn’t see you do it?” He gave a weak thumbs-up before his knees started to buckle. Sammy and Franz came running forward to catch him and help into a nearby chair. Agnes went to grab the first-aid kit.

“Excellent job, Arch.” I told him.

“So. Now can I know why I just did that?” he asked. “That was a perfectly good phone. It had my favorite Star Wars case on it.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get it back. Hold on. Someone bring me a laptop!” Many of the Empathizers looked at me like I had gone slightly insane, but then Pitty Pat came to my rescue.

“I think I know where you’re going with this,” he said. “Be right back.” He went jogging up the stairs. Olivia stepped forward, cooling her knuckles with the glass of beer.

“Raye, where *are* you going with this?” she asked.

“I’ll show you,” I told her.

It had been Noah’s idea, actually. Well, indirectly. When I’d spoken to him on the phone, he had, in his typical fashion, gone prattling away about his anxieties. And in his typical fashion, he’d given me quite a bit of seemingly useless information. Most of it was just this: useless. But I’ve found it to be the case that when I listen with complete attention, there is almost always something worth hearing. In this instance, it was when Noah shared with me that he had found a new way to recover his cellphone when he lost it. He’d begun using an app called “Find my iPhone,” he’d told me, which used GPS to track the lost item through the user’s iCloud account. Something about his description of the app had stuck with me and, figuring this would prove useful (knowing it intuitively, *sensing* it in the way I felt the invisible, guiding hand of the Omni), I presently made sure that all Empathizers had an iCloud account connecting their devices. There had been some grumbles and questions from the older Empathizers, but they eventually accepted that this technology was significant for the Project. Now here was their proof.

Pitty Pat already had the iCloud sign-in page opened up when he handed me his laptop. He’d also come prepared with a portable router that, he explained, would provide Internet service within a ten-foot radius.

“Like, for instance... in a car,” he said, grinning. “Did I guess right?”

Rayanna 15

From the looks of the green iPhone icon, Edgar was heading toward Lake Wallenpaupack, and he was driving fast. I rallied a group of young Empathizers to follow him, and equipped each of them with a copy of Mion. The plan went like this: eight people, including me and Olivia, would track Edgar to his meeting place, and bring back the Apathetic Six that he'd stolen from us. The rest of the group would stay behind to clean up Allway, and take care of Edgar's victims. I made sure that Archie and Xavier were bandaged up properly before leaving them to rest. As I said my goodbyes, I resisted a strong urge to embrace these two, knowing I might injure them more if I tried. They had both shown such fearlessness, such faith in me and in the Omni. It filled me with a kind of righteous passion I'd only ever experienced in small bursts. I would make a point of telling them all this later.

The eight of us who were on the recovery mission split up between two cars. I drove one, Franz the other. Olivia rode next me. Behind us sat Sammy, and a shrewd college dropout (a relative newcomer to the Project) named Kassandra. I'd chosen the latter because she had been pursuing a degree in comparative literature, and because she had displayed an exceptional eye for detail during the month since I'd recruited her. Sharp, literary minds were exactly what I needed to use Mion against Edgar.

"I'll take the lead," I told Franz, through the lowered window of my Volvo. "Liv here has the GPS ready on her laptop. If you lose us, call her." Franz made an A-Okay sign, and fired up his ignition. I was almost through the gate when there was a sharp knock on the passenger window. Olivia let loose a quick scream and pulled her head back.

“What the fuck?” I said. Eli had his palm pressed against the glass. He looked ghostly in the whitish light of the two vehicles. When he stooped, I saw that a large bump had formed on his forehead. His eyes looked slightly glazed, and more deep-set than usual. “It’s okay, Olivia. Roll it down,” I told her. “Eli, what are you doing out there? You need to be in bed.”

“I’m sorry!” said Agnes, bursting out of the house. “I tried to tell him it wasn’t safe. But he was too fast. He just woke up all of a sudden and…” She stopped by the side of the car and placed a hand on Eli’s arm.

“It’s all right, Agnes,” I told her. “It’s not your fault. Eli… you all right?” There was a pause while his eyes struggled to focus. “Eli?”

“I’m fine,” he finally said. Olivia jerked backward again in fright. “Sorry, didn’t mean to freak you out. I bet I look a little worse for the wear. But I promise I’m fine now.” He did, in fact, sound fine. Perhaps it was just the acoustics of the car, or the angle at which I was hearing him, but he actually sounded even more confident than usual. “I promise this isn’t as bad as it seems.” He gestured at the swelling on his head. “I was hoping I could come along with you to Edgar’s. I want to help you get the Apathetic back.” Olivia and I made eye contact; she seemed as hesitant as I felt. “I promise there won’t be any hothead stuff this time,” he reassured us. “I won’t get myself hurt.”

“What’s goin’ on up there?” Franz said.

“Nothing. Just give us a second,” I shouted. “Eli, I don’t feel great about bringing you. You just took a pretty bad fall.”

“It’s really no problem. I should probably put some ice on this when we get back but for now I’m very much in my right mind.” He flashed me a determined grin. In my head, I played out several disaster scenarios involving him losing consciousness at inconvenient

moments. “Look. I know it’s sort of strange circumstance for you guys but I’ve got to admit this is really exciting for me. I’m starting to understand what the Project is about, and I’m all for it.” I glanced at the GPS on Olivia’s lap. The phone icon was still moving but it had slowed down. “I see how important it is to bring back the people he stole from us.” I didn’t want to give Edgar the chance to send the Apathetic somewhere else. We didn’t have time for this.

“Okay, fine,” I told him. “Get in.” Agnes began to protest but I told her it would be all right. “Go tend to the others.” She nodded her head, looking worried, and hurried back to the house.

“Do you mind if I ride shotgun?” Eli asked Olivia, brazenly. “I get dizzy in the backseats sometimes. And I just... don’t want to take any chances what with this.” He pointed to his head. “Navigating is no problem for me.” I was about to protest on Olivia’s behalf, but she gave presently shrugged and got out of the car.

“All yours,” she said.

The sky was fuzzy and moonless. The countryside drifted by silently. I felt reassured by the distant presence of houselights, blemishes the night had forgotten to conceal. It was easy to feel like I was piloting a tiny metal insect, humming along unseen and unknown. I split my focus between the glowing yellow lines on the dark road, and the copy of Mion I’d hastily taped to the dashboard. “Track the fissure of discontent... follow the winged beast to his shackled prisoners,” I mumbled to myself. That was what we were doing: tracking Edgar, unearthing his discontent, recovering his prisoners. Good. That was taken care of. The line that said, “to swing shut forth is to let forth the demons...” was also reassuring to me: it meant I had been right in my instinct to follow after Edgar. Were we to shut him out, and leave it at that... well then he might come back even stronger, even angrier. The line, “let the

dark red come flowing forth,” was troubling. It seemed to imply bloodshed, and I wanted to avoid more violence if at all possible. Perhaps the red had already flown? Perhaps the violence was behind us? It had already become apparent that the order in which the events of Mion were written did not necessarily represent the order in which they would occur. So the “flowing red” could easily symbolize the blood that had appeared on Edgar’s lip, or Archie’s injury. But no— that didn’t seem quite right. The Omni wouldn’t have used a word like “flowing” to describe such abrasions.

Eli asked the Empathizers in the backseat what they thought was waiting for us at the end of this trip. His tone was bold, energetic. I felt vaguely annoyed at him and I wasn’t sure why. Maybe because he had asked for the passenger seat only to start a conversation with those in back. Or more likely, because his zeal was out of place. His attitude ignored the importance of the situation at hand. He had never met the Apathetic, so he had no way of knowing how much it mattered to return them to Allway. He was treating this like a joyride. Yeah, that was it. That’s what was bothering me. Sure, it was true that he’d expressed how committed to the Project he’d begun to feel, but it was also true that this sentiment struck me as rushed. I glanced back at Olivia. She gave me a sharp, unsmiling nod. She, at least, felt the gravity of the situation. Eli twisted himself back forward and checked the laptop.

“Okay,” he said, looking at the laptop. “Looks like he’s slowing down now. Hasn’t made it far from the lake.”

“Am I staying on this road?” I asked him. The sound of the highway took something of the resonance out of my voice.

“What?” he asked.

“I asked if I’m staying on this road.” He answered that I would be taking a turn in a couple miles. From there it was a straight shot.

* * *

I parked the car a quarter of a mile from our destination, at the mouth of a narrow dirt path. It was imperative that we took Edgar by surprise, since we would have to enter and leave quickly. As the Omni wished, we had to “flit,” to be “the only ones that flit.”

The path felt like it had once been used, useful. Some caring hands had arranged small grey stones along either side of it, though enough of the stones had since gotten buried or knocked out of place to produce an aura of something broken. It was quiet. Even quieter than around Allway. I focused on the light ahead of us. I focused on looking like I knew what was coming. Our rustling clothing and heavy breathing all seemed out of place. The sound of crickets swelled languidly in welcome.

“HAWLEY MUSEUM OF ANCIENT HIS...” announced a fractured sign. We lingered before it, all sensing that we ought to extract something from its cracked message. “The broadsword,” muttered Cassandra. I turned to see her looking down at her copy of *Mion*, then back up at the sign. “Eat from the halls of the oft-swung broadsword,” she said. I was momentarily frustrated that she had thought of this first, came close to pointing out that no one actually swings broadswords in museums. But these were silly, pettily jealous notions. Of course she was right.

“Brilliant, Cassandra,” I said. “We’re in the right place.”

“Guess there’s food waiting for us,” said Eli, with a smile. No one reacted. “Eat from the halls, right?” I squinted my eyes at the property, and caught sight of the pick-up truck. I gathered the Empathizers into a huddle and looked at each of their faces. Nine was perhaps too many, I realized. I didn’t quite know what to do with all of these willing soldiers.

“He’s here,” I told them. “Probably feeding the Apathetic some story about how we jumped him. Probably getting them ready for some battle against us. So here’s the plan: Me, Olivia, Sammy, and Cassandra will go talk to them and convince them to come back to Allway. Franz, and Alicia, you two head back to the cars. You’re on getaway duty.”

“What about us?” asked Pitty Pat, gesturing towards himself, and the two other men.

“You’re coming with us too,” I told him. “Just watch our backs. Restrain Edgar if you need to, but don’t hurt him.” They all nodded, Eli a little too enthusiastically. “Except for you, Eli,” I added. “Go grab Archie’s phone out of Edgar’s car, then stay out here. On the off-chance that Edgar hurts someone and they need help getting back to the car, you’ll be that guy.” Eli looked crestfallen for a fraction of a second, then quickly recovered and gave a resolute nod.

“What are we going to do with Edgar?” asked Pitty Pat.

“Nothing. Leave him be. Just make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone else.” As we left Eli behind, I glanced back and saw him lower his head again, grimacing. It was possible that the pain of getting knocked out had finally caught up with him. In that case, it was all the wiser that he was staying out of the action. I’d make sure Agnes gave him a close look the next morning. Six of us crept silently up the stone steps of the old museum. I couldn’t see the state of the facade, but I sensed that it was leaky and forbidding. It smelled dank. I felt the coolness of the floor through my shoes. Sammy froze and made her eyes squinty.

“You hear that?” she said.

“Yeah,” said her husband. I strained my ears and made out a dull thumping.

“Weird,” said Olivia. Pitty Pat said he thought it sounded like club music.

“Check through that window, Dom,” I said, referring to the broken panel near his shoulder. He peered in and exhaled, disappointed.

“Too dark. I can’t make out anything except a weird flashing light.”

“Flashing... do you think he’s torturing them, Raye?” asked Cassandra. I doubted it.

“Only one way to find out,” I said. “Everyone ready?” Nods all around. I stepped forward and pressed my fingers lightly into the door. It swung open easily.

Rayanna 16

The thumping bass echoed in the lobby of the abandoned museum. Dom located a switch by the front door and flicked on some overhead fluorescents. I looked around. It was desolate, gray, enormous, unfriendly, cobwebbed. Most of the artifacts had been removed, but the center of the room was dominated by the bust of a tall, antediluvian soldier holding a dead woman. Pulled by a strange magnetism, I walked up to the bust. A leak had sprung in the ceiling almost directly above it. Dirty droplets were rolling down the length of their bodies. The man looked heroic and appropriately anguished. The woman smiled, vacantly. She wore a tasteful nightgown, flawless except for the thin shaft jutting out from her stomach. How had that arrow survived the ravages of time? And how had the bust itself not been removed entirely? I suspected the latter had something to do with the power in the figures' faces. No one had been able to gaze into that woman's strange, empty smile and issue the command for her removal.

"Raye," prompted Olivia. I broke out of my reverie. The others were standing in a semi-circle behind me, waiting. I came close to saying I was sorry. But Ron had taught me to save my apologies for when they mattered. Olivia cocked her head toward the source of the music. In the back corner of the lobby there was a slightly ajar door, leaking green light and heavy bass. What used to be an employee lounge, or an office, perhaps.

"It would seem the Apathetic know how to party," said Dom.

"Time for us to crash then," said Sammy.

"Wait why are assuming it's a party? Why would they be having a party?" asked Olivia. "They're here against their will."

“I still think it’s a form of torture,” said Kassandra. Sammy looked as though she might retaliate but I held up a hand to stop her. There was no use bickering about this theoretically. They all waited for my go-ahead.

“Okay,” I told them. The music masked the sound of our steps. I moved far ahead of the group. I was in the room before I realized I’d passed the bust.

“What are you doing here?” Edgar moaned from a grubby armchair.

“I...” I stammered, unable to process what I was seeing.

“How did you find us?” he screamed.

“What’s going on? Who’s in there?” asked Pitty Pat. The others hadn’t caught up with me yet. “Raye!” A green strobe light beat steadily, oppressively. Tall, vibrating speakers unloaded hateful rap music into the room. The centerpiece of it attempted to conceal himself with the bottom of his robe.

“Edgar,” I gasped.

“Come to punch me around some more?” he said. Like what you see?” he asked, desperately. He stood and his knee collided with the small table in front of him. He yelled in pain. Bags of chips and boxes of cereal went tumbling to the floor. A large metal bowl upended and the liquid shot toward my feet. I backed up instinctively. “Don’t worry. No one stays.” He had tears in his eyes. Olivia burst into the room. Several of the others followed.

“What the hell? Where are they?” said Olivia.

“I said no one stays,” said Edgar, hunching over. “I’d offer you punch but it’s all over the floor now.”

“Where are you keeping them?” she shrieked, running towards him, her white face flashing beneath the strobe. “Where are they shackled, Edgar?” I tried to grab her back but

she shook my arm off. She grabbed hold of Edgar's hair and yanked his chin up. "Where are they? Where is Jacob?"

"Mm," he grinned and licked his lips. "I was just thinking about this." Olivia let go of him, disgusted.

"Liv, let's go," I told her. "There's nothing for us here." All five other Empathizers had entered the room now. They stood there, motionless, baffled by the scene in front of them. I turned to them. "We're going, everyone. This was a mistake. We didn't interpret the doctrine correctly. I was wrong."

"Finally she admits it! Don't let Ron's little girl control you," Edgar said. "She doesn't know what she's doing. Not like he did." My shoes had soaked up some of the punch. The bass seemed louder than before. "No one fucking stays," he said. "I told them I would keep them safe. I told them I'd give them what they needed, but they didn't want any of it. They didn't want my generosity." He was reaching beneath his armchair. Something about the tone of his voice alerted me to what was coming.

"We're leaving. Now, everyone!" I tried to shove Pitty Pat through the door.

"What's he got in his hand?" asked Dom.

"Now!" I screamed. A bullet ripped through the wall, a few inches from my hand. We raced out of the room, colliding with one another. An arm rammed into my shoulder as we ran, bruising what felt like the whole right side of my body. I had to help Sammy to her feet twice before we reached the front door of the museum.

Rayanna 17

Another shot sounded as we leapt from the stone steps and onto the front-yard. Cassandra screamed. I checked left and right as we ran towards the dirt road. I counted five other figures. No one appeared to be wounded. I said a silent thank you to the Omni.

“Is he chasing us?” said Olivia, breathlessly. “I can’t tell.” I glanced back. Edgar had not yet emerged from the museum. “What’s wrong with him?”

“That got out of hand so fucking fast,” panted Dom.

“Just keep running,” I told the group. Cassandra stumbled but stayed on her feet; several Empathizers sounded like they were close to hyperventilating. We had almost reached the dirt path when a figure came tearing past us. I froze and watched as it slowed to a brisk walk in the perimeter of the museum. I could tell from its swift, wide gait that it was Eli.

“What the hell is he doing?” asked Olivia, stopping beside me.

“He’s going back to get Edgar’s car,” said Dom. “To make sure he can’t follow us. Wait...” Eli veered away from the car and toward the museum steps. “Guess not.”

“What the hell is he doing?” repeated Olivia. I bit my thumbnail, cursing myself for having brought him to Allway. I shouldn’t have been so trusting so quickly. Now he had to play the hero.

“Fucking men,” I muttered. Olivia voiced her agreement. “I’ll get him. You guys keep going,” I told the group.

“But—” started Olivia.

“Go!” I told them. “I’ll be fine. I’ll meet you at the cars.” Another shot rang out. Four of the Empathizers ran down the dirt path and disappeared. I grabbed Olivia by the hand and told her she had to leave.

“Guess I’m not going to get a sappy—”

“Go, Olivia!” I yelled in her face.

“Okay, jeez, I’m going.” She kissed my cheek and ran after the others.

“Eli!” I said. He didn’t turn back. I caught up to him on the porch, but kept my distance from the front door, which he was standing directly in front of. I stayed to the sides of the entrance, just to right of the broken window. “Eli what’s going on with you, man?” He cocked his head to look at me.

“He’s the Firedragon,” he said. “Have to make the game.”

“In case you somehow missed it— and it kind of seems like you did— Edgar is running around like a lunatic in there with a gun.” He showed no signs of retreat. Don’t go in there, Eli.”

“A challenger awaits,” he said. He lifted a scrawny leg and kicked open the door.

“Eli!” He vanished into the museum. “Dammit.” I backed up and looked through the window. I watched him reemerge as a dark shape beneath the fluorescence. At almost precisely the same moment, the door to the employee lounge banged open and Edgar came billowing out in his robe. He was still wielding the handgun, and I could see from the intermittent green flashes that he was still grimacing. The music thundered out from the speakers and filled the whole lobby. Edgar leveled the gun at Eli from across the room. “Eli, move your ass!” I yelled. Edgar fired his weapon and Eli did a somersault toward the bust. He fired again and a chunk flew out of the white soldier’s legs. I hated this, feeling like I had

to look out for Eli so he could get away with acting so stupidly. Part of me wanted to leave this two to their fun.

“This attack was ineffective!” Eli yelled over the music. “Going stealth mode.” I couldn’t make out what he said next, but he ducked behind the bust, and out of sight. Edgar kept his gun raised and strode forward. I kept just enough of my head above the window to go unseen. Edgar walked a full, slow circle around the statues and emerged from around the other side, looking confused. Just then, Eli jumped from behind the soldier, seemingly out of nowhere, and swung a foot into Edgar’s face. The older man fell to the floor and his gun went skidding away. “The boomer lost 50 points!” hollered Eli. “The millennial gained the lead.” He jumped from the bust and landed on his feet a few inches from his opponent. Edgar leapt up with surprising vigor and attempted to uppercut the younger man. “You’re lucky this isn’t a Twitter war!” said Eli, dodging the attack. “You worried I’m a slave to my phone, old man? You worried I won’t make something of myself?” Edgar barreled forward, clawing at the air in fury. Eli backpedaled, continuing to holler nonsense. The two exchanged blows while I calmly concluded that both of them had lost their minds. Edgar was beyond help, and Eli was too shaken up by his injury for me to get through to him. I had to end their absurd game. Not that the gun was out of play, I planned on doing just that. I crept away from the window and into the open door of the lobby. The firearm had slid just a few feet away from the front door, so I immediately picked it up and directed it at the two combatants. It took them a moment to realize what was happening. Eli was repeatedly thrusting a knee into Edgar’s stomach.

“Hey,” I told them. They froze and looked up at me like children caught awake after bedtime. “You’re done, Eli.” He held tight to the shoulder of Edgar’s robe.

“Mion Ghoul hasn’t been fulfilled,” he said. “Have to make a script out of...”

“You’re not going to fulfill anything this way,” I told him, severely. “Now let Edgar go back to this sad life.” Eli punched Edgar in the stomach. I shot the gun up in the air. Eli backed up from Edgar in fear. It was exhilarating, the first time I’d fired a bullet since my hunting lessons. “We’re going home, Eli. We’re going back to Allway now.” Eli yelled incoherently and took another swing, this time lazily. Edgar easily sidestepped the punch. “Eli, stop it.” He stumbled a little and yawned.

“Did anybody else just get really tired?” he asked. Edgar spat blood.

“Eli...” I started. He swayed back and forth, moaning drowsily. Then he fell to the ground. A long moment passed while Edgar and I stood face to face. I kept the gun aimed at his stomach. The bass thumped. His hand dripped blood. If only he had admitted to himself how much he needed the Project, how much he missed Ron. He was a fool to have buried these feelings. Why had Omni had led me here? Or had this really all been a mistake? A misinterpretation? I took a deep breath in and out. I would find a way to deal with this, whether or not I’d gone wrong. “Okay, Edgar. Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to help me get Eli back to the car. You’re going to carry him there, and I’m going to keep this gun pointed at you the entire time. So don’t try any more crazy stuff, okay?” He nodded feebly. “Once we get Eli back to the car, you’re going to come back here, take your car, and drive to your sister’s house. You will never come back to Allway. You will get rid of any guns you own. You will never contact me, or Olivia, or any of the other Empathizers, old or new. You will do your best to pretend you were never part of the Empathy Project. If you show up again, I won’t stop anyone from hurting you. Understand?” He smoothed out his grubby robe, dabbed at his eyes, and tried to raise his chin. Never had I seen so broken a man.

“Okay.”

Elias 18

I woke up aching all over. Possibly the worst “aching all over” of my life, surpassing even the “aching all over” I’d experienced after my right lung collapsed in the tenth grade. I remember weakly arguing with the doctors, convinced that they were lying to me, convinced that lungs don’t just up and quit, and moreover, that I would be feeling pain exclusively in my throat if that were indeed what had happened.

“It happens to tall guys sometimes,” was the doctor’s professional diagnosis. Apparently when the respiratory system can’t keep up with the growth rate of a lanky, anemic, overgrown teenager, it simply cries uncle and stops, regardless of whether or not this teenager happens to be participating in intense athletics at the moment or, for example, making a peanut butter & jelly sandwich in his step-mom’s kitchen on a Saturday night. And apparently, when your lungs cry uncle, when the body only gets half as much oxygen as it needs, it starts doing unwanted things, like stumbling into refrigerators, knocking over microwave ovens, and generally banging itself up in a way that you, the person whose lung has just collapsed, the lung-loser, won’t fully notice until you’ve woken up in a hospital bed covered in bruises.

As a lung-loser, at least I’d had people around to explain my injuries to me. A patient father, and an unceremonious doctor waiting to fill me in on the details of my accident the very moment I awoke. Now, lying atop an unyielding cot, barely able to move my limbs because of the pain throbbing throughout my entire body, using the little mobility I had to barely look around this unknown room (ostensibly in Allway, but I was too disoriented to say for sure), I felt very alone. No kind paternal hands to stroke my forehead, no reassuring

white sterility. Just me, and my confusion with the fact that my whole body was hurting, since the only injury I could remember suffering was Edgar's elbow to the temple.

Because it's often what I do when I feel confused and lonely, and because it's often what I do when I first wake up, I reached for my phone. It wasn't in my pocket, and I panicked for a moment before discovering someone had been kind enough to plug it into a charger on the bedside table. I took one look at my lock screen and cursed aloud.

Noah Missed Calls (13)

Noah Voicemail (2)

Unknown Number Voicemail

Dad Missed Call (2)

Dad Voicemail...

Noah Text Message...

I scrolled down to find that I'd also missed calls from Avery and Jackson. I navigated to my voicemail page, pressed the tab for the most recent message, and listened.

"Hi Elias, it's Dad. Just wanted to check that everything is all right with you. I just received an Email from the company that supplies the oil to your house in Pennsylvania; apparently you listed me as your emergency contact. They say that you haven't paid for oil since you moved in? And they've been trying to get ahold of you. So you may want to see what that's about— I'm sure what with the, uh, computer game job you can get that squared away. I also wanted to call and tell you that your mother's recent treatment has been going a little less effectively than she hoped, so if you could—" I ended the voicemail. I would deal with these problems later. I pressed the next tab, curious what this unknown number was.

“Hi Eli, this Doctor Wee. I was wondering if you’d be willing to come in and talk about the new course of medication I have you on. The updated version of the—” Nothing urgent— just medical logistics. Noah’s voicemail was seven minutes long, so I didn’t bother to listen to it. I pressed his name, raised the phone to my ear, and waited for him to pick up. It only took one ring before I heard his voice.

“Did you get my messages?” he said, without introduction.

“No. I just saw all the missed calls and called you back,” I said, my voice thick with sleep. “What’s up, man?” I cleared my throat while he asked me why the fuck I hadn’t been picking up.

“Patchy service.”

“Fuck, man,” he said, clearly in distress.

“What?” I said. He inhaled and exhaled deeply. “What?” I asked, more urgently.

“Just. Google Ubiware right now.”

“Why? What’ll I—”

“Just do it.”

“Okay, okay.” I put Noah on speaker and navigated to my browser. While the search engine loaded, I idly swirled my finger around the substantial sphere that had formed on my forehead. I typed in the name of the gaming company and the first result that appeared told me almost everything I needed to know:

““Ubiware takes gaming world by storm with biggest Easter Egg ever,”” I read aloud.

“No.”

“Yeah,” said Noah.

“No fucking way. They didn’t. Those fuckers didn’t. Ow.” I had craned my head too far forward. A twinge of pain shot down my neck.

“They did.”

“Hold on, let me— Jesus Christ hold on I’m gonna’ read through it. I’ll call you back. Ow!” Both temples surged with pain as I turned.

“You okay, man?” asked Noah. I hung up and started reading.

When the Montreal-based game developer, Ubiware, released its first sports game, *Higher Goals*, last Friday, nobody expected much out of it. During the months leading up to the game’s release, there had been close to zero promotion or media buzz. Ubiware released a few previews, but the game just looked like it was going to be another FIFA rip-off, with some improved crowd graphics, and more rough n’ tumble gameplay. You might say it felt like the game was being kept under wraps, but no one was trying to unwrap it in the first place. The general consensus among the gaming community was that *Hired Goals* was just a half-baked attempt by Ubiware to reach the sports-savvy demographic. Why it was trying to do this, no one really knew, since Ubiware’s open-world series like *Fae-Lore* and *Bottomfeeders*, have earned them a more-than-decent fan base over the years...

I skimmed the rest of the intro paragraph and arrived at:

That was until someone found out the catch.

Just four hours after the game’s release, IGN messageboards and gaming subreddits began to light up with activity. *Hired Goals*, it seemed, was a much more complex game than it seemed. Players were in a frenzy because the game apparently *transforms from a sports game into an open-world game without any warning*. None of these rumors gained a huge amount of currency, however, until a video by YouTube Game Reviewer NickelBoiGamer77 went viral, showing his apparently real-time reaction to the game’s “Big Switcheroo,” (as it has since been dubbed) In the video, NickelBoiGamer77 repeatedly yells...

I stopped reading and clicked the link to the video. As it loaded, I breathed deeply, trying to calm my rising anger. I sank to the floor and leaned against the side of the cot. A

YouTube Ad showed a car being driven through a desert, a jungle, and, inexplicably, an aircraft carrier.

“When the elements are more than you can imagine,” said the deep-voiced narrator.

“Shut up,” I told my phone. The Ad wasn’t the kind where I could press “skip” after ten seconds, which, given the circumstances, made me feel like a Greater Power was cosmically punishing me. Finally, the Ad ended and I saw a split-screen. On the right side, a teenager sat wearing a headset and holding an XBOX controller, gazing vacantly to the right of the camera. On the left was footage of a soccer videogame.

“All right youtubers, this NickelBoiGamer77 reviewing Higher Goals,” he drawled in a nasally voice. “I don’t even know why I’m doing this honestly caus’ this game looks pretty freakin’ suckish.” He adjusted his glasses and sniffed loudly. “But whatever. Hopefully you get something out of this or... something. I don’t know.” I noticed the video was twenty-six minutes long. I paused it, exhaling in frustration. I had a hunch, so I scrolled down to look at the comments. Sure enough, the comment with the most thumbs up (from the youtuber “EarsapsFables”) said, “Big Switcheroo happens at 8:18. You’re welcome.” I scrolled back up to the video and dragged the grey progress bar to 7:45. I pressed play.

“–guess that’s kinda’ cool,” NickelBoiGamer77 was saying. “But who really cares about the design of the soccer ball.” He seemed even more vapid, and needlessly irked than at the beginning of the video. The left side of the screen showed more generic soccer gameplay. The players passed the ball. They ran. They crowd roared. “The graphics in the turf are nice I guess but– aw what?” he whined. On the left side of the screen the ball was at rest and the ref was whistling furiously. I felt a stabbing sense of familiarity. “Are you effing kidding me? How was that a foul? That’s total bullcrap. Wait what the–” A glowing line of

text had appeared on his screen that said: “Don’t like the ref’s call? Press A now to punch him.”

“Don’t like the ref’s call Press A now to punch him?” read NickelBoi, confused. “What the hell is this?” He paused and scanned the screen, contemplating. “Well I guess I should do it. I mean hell no I didn’t like his call...” NickelBoi’s attempt at ironic indignation fizzled out as the soccer player he was manipulating socked the ref cleanly in the jaw. “Holy shit,” he said. Health bars appeared next to the soccer player and the ref, and the music of the game changed drastically. The words “Battle initiated” appeared at the top of the screen in sloppy red font.

“That all you got?” asked the ref. He started to cock back his arm but as he did another prompt appeared inviting NickelBoi to hammer on the R-trigger button and consequently parry the ref’s blow, an invitation which the awestruck gamer happily obliged. Once the ref went down, the game went to a brief cut-scene. A row of gunmen rose up in the stands and start firing in the direction of the soccer players. The camera returned to active gameplay and an unbroken stream of prompts appeared on the screen suggesting that NickelBoi make his character dodge, deflect, and disarm— all of this while he repeatedly screamed the words, “What is even happening? Best Easter Egg ever!” with increasing gusto. I felt like throwing my phone at the wall.

I dragged the video progress bar to 19:26 and found NickelBoi’s, now street-clothes-garbed soccer player beating up a band of thugs in a shady dive bar.

“Best Easter Egg ever,” he was still repeating, though now in an awestricken whisper, as though he’d forgotten he was still saying it.

“This is bad,” I told Noah, when he picked up the phone.

“It is.”

“It’s intellectual property theft.”

“I know.”

“How can you be so calm about this?”

“Because I’ve known for the past twelve hours.”

“What are we going to do, Noah?”

“Just get your ass into the city. The other guys are waiting.”

END OF PART ONE

