

The Roles We Play

Prologue: The Contents of the Egg Salad Sandwich

At long last, the undaunted team of heroes strode through the massive gates leading into the fabled Temple of Xanathoth, a trail of blood, sweat and tears stretching out behind them. Here, they would at last confront the source of the Nightmare Plague devastating the lands of Colmerath and, gods willing, restore peace and sanity to their subjects.

Perhaps, mused Gitgüd, they would even find themselves the richer for their troubles.

Each strode into the temple's torch-lit interior for their own motives. For Gitgüd, the promise of a dragon's hoard was more than adequate. The elf maiden Shal'valek wanted only to achieve what her sorcerous magic had been unable to grant her, the return of the true tranquility of a night's rest uninterrupted by the fiendish visions inflicted by the Paramaculum. Though he had never put it in words, Gentry Gallows stoked the fires of vengeance raging in his heart, where soon, he dared to hope that last agonizing memory of his lost Haelene would soon fade. The desire to regain his hold over his people's stolen domain was more than enough to impel Deep Lord Korrigal of the Twelve Thunders to action. And for the hulking half-orc Grim-Mace, the promise of a fight had been all he needed. Indeed, it was probably all the more of the details of this mission he'd paid attention to.

The temple appeared to feature but the single chamber, the length of which was nearly lost in the distance. Nonetheless, it was impossible to miss the sight of the purple-black crystal that could only be the Paramaculum, hovering in the distance over a stone slab crusted in the blood of countless sacrifices. The ceiling stretched higher than even Deep Lord Korrigal or Grim-Mace's darkness-attuned eyes could pierce, though every nostril was all too keenly aware of the foul, brackish water filling the pools that stretched along its length.

"Don't get too close to that water," cautioned the gnome Gentry. "Remember, we saw those black scales littering the caverns above. If those were what we think they were, you know what could be lurking in there."

Gitgüd withdrew the magical torch from her pack, its heatless light dimmed in this unholy place. She tossed it into one such pool, where it sank quite a little ways into the water before being obscured from sight by the muck. "Plenty of room down there to hide. Not that you can hide from a boss like this."

"It still has a back for stabbing," assured Grim-Mace with his usual arrogant sneer. "So make sure you don't puss out on us again and make me do everything."

Shal'valek's spritely laughter was enough to wash away the bleak mood. "Maybe if you started doing a worse job, we wouldn't keep over-relying on you," she said,

squeezing the brute's shoulder. Against his best intentions, he flashed a smile, or at least what passed for a smile amongst his kind. The crooked and broken teeth combined with breath so foul it rivaled his legendary mace Brainy in driving enemies to flee from him.

"Are you guys going to keep flirting all night, or can we start exploring the creepy temple?" Deep Lord Korrigal was abrupt as always.

Grim-Mace's response was simply to lift his loincloth and shake his manhood at the dwarven cleric. "Explore this, half-size."

"Focus, you guys. There's no way this Parmarambulus is unguarded," cautioned Gentry. Like that, the group remembered the gravity of the moment, and returned their attention to their surroundings, scouring every dark corner for signs of their quarry.

"Oh, so *now* you listen? That's exactly what I said to do!" griped the Deep Lord. "And he didn't even pronounce it right!"

"Who cares how you pronounce it? When we win, we can call it whatever the fuck we want," said Gitgüd with a grin.

"*WHEN YOU WIN?*" came a sudden voice, reverberating around the stone walls like thunder, accompanied by peals of derisive laughter. "*YOUR ARROGANCE TRULY KNOWS NO BOUNDS.*"

All present recognized without a doubt the identity of the speaker, though none had heard that voice before. None save for Gentry, whose fists clenched in hatred. "You call us arrogant, but it's hard not to feel bold in the face of so cowardly a creature. After all, what kind of being murders innocent women and children in their sleep? Waiting until their protector is away assisting a comrade to burn down homes in the night?"

"Wait, is this the same...?!" Shal'valek gasped. "That's right! I remember that voice now, back from the beginning of our quest! You murdered his family! Why? Why would you even do such a thing?!"

"*THERE IS NO WHY. REASONS ARE FOR LESSER BEINGS SUCH AS YOURSELVES, BESET WITH THE NEED TO JUSTIFY YOUR EXISTENCE. SOON, THE PARAMACULUM WILL SHOW YOU THE TRUTH, AS IT HAS REVEALED IT TO ME.*"

"Oh yeah? And what truth is that?"

"*THAT ALL EXISTENCE MEETS CHAOS AND MADNESS. I FEEL THE DESPAIR THAT DRIVES YOU. IT WILL SOON UNRAVEL YOUR FLESH AS IT IS ALREADY UNRAVELING YOUR MINDS.*"

"Doesn't seem like your stupid trinket's gonna unravel my twelve-inch dick once Brainy and I shatter it into a million pieces, asswipe." The half-orc's crudeness was often a difficulty in social situations. It hadn't been that long since their panicked flight from the court of King Maldouen, when, as the group beseeched him to send armsmen to aid them, Grim-Mace had dangled a piece of meat in the corpulent sovereign's face and

asked if he might be persuaded by a pork chop. Moments like this more than made up for it.

“YOU SEEK TO GOAD ME, MORTALS—”

“Anyone else ever noticed how they always call us ‘mortals’ right before we prove their mortality?” mumbled Gitgüd.

“–BUT YOU CANNOT DRIVE TO IMPULSE WHAT IS ALREADY CONSUMED BY INSANITY. I WILL DESTROY YOU WHEN THE WHIM STRIKES ME, AND NOT A MOMENT BEFORE.”

“Yeah, well, in the meantime, we’ll be over here, smashing your precious Prambulada,” said Gentry. “Let’s get to work, gang!”

In an instant, all of them laid hands on the crimson cloak of Shal’valeb as she chanted the magic words. In a flash of blue-white light, the group disappeared and was suddenly standing only a few dozen paces from the altar. “Sorry, this was as close as I could get us!”

This close, the Paramaculum’s psychic resonance was piercing their brains, incomprehensible whispers tormenting them, images of carnage and chaos echoing in their minds’ eyes. Deep Lord Korrigan, bolstered by his faith in the gods of his ancestors, dismissed it quickly, “Good enough, Shal. All right, let’s...”

Behind them, not far from where they had stood a moment ago, a great gout of water burst from the pool. An enraged roar echoed through the temple as their enemy took to his feet, wasting no time in shaking the water off its black-scaled body. Even as the PCs stared in a mix of horror and determination, he leapt into the air, rushing at them with unfathomable speed.

“Dragon! I told you it was a dragon!” cried Grim-Mace, giggling in anticipation of the coming battle.

Gentry scowled as he loaded a bullet into his sling staff. “We all said it was going to be a dragon! Now come on – stick to the plan, and we got this thing!”

Yet if they heard his orders, there was no sign of it apparent to their nemesis. Deep Lord Korrigan of the Twelve Thunders barely managed to get off a single spell – a personal ward that he hoped would spare him the worst of its primary weapon – before they fled, wailing in terror. Even Grim-Mace, who they had seen stand his ground before an on-rushing stampede of minotaurs, was immediately dashing for the corner with the others, heedless of the tactical blunder. In a moment, they would be trapped behind the far end of a pool, with no exit but to recross the footbridge they were presently fleeing across, or to go swimming. Gentry had no choice but to dash after them, only a short ways in front of the dwarf.

“Where are you—” That was all he got out before the dragon made its first pass. Sure enough, as it drew close, it belched forth from its gullet an incredible mass of thin green bile, spraying forth in a geyser of acidic death. Deep Lord Korrigan took the brunt

of the assault, but his ward left most of the nauseating spillage draining harmlessly off his coat and sizzling on the ground at his retreating boots. Grim-Mace grunted as a small splash smoked at where his brawny arms emerged from his breastplate, and to the group's dismay, Shal'valek howled as the acid ate through much of her outer clothing, melting the flesh beneath.

Grim-Mace turned, raising Brainy in a meaty fist, but the dragon turned mid-air and darted back into the temple. "What, you don't have the scaly balls to land and fight me, you draconic douchebag?!"

"This is the boss of the entire campaign – he's not going to pull punches and use stupid tactics," declared Gitgüd emphatically. "If we win, we're going to have to earn it. Now who brought a ranged weapon?"

The dragon took its time circling back, its sleek reptilian shape appearing and disappearing in the shadows of the temple. All of them knew it was building up its acidic reserves, ready to make use of them again. For all his talk of madness and chaos, it would strike at the optimal time and not before.

"You do have more of those acid protection spells, right, Derp Lord?" demanded Gitgüd.

Shal'valek dropped a spell of haste on the clustered group while they waited, adding, "Yeah, it's on my spells known list, but I never took it since you always said you had it covered."

"Not if you call me Derp Lord," he said, folding his arms petulantly.

Gentry gaped. "You've got to be kidding me. Come on, man, it's going to be back any second! Every one of you has been mispronouncing my name since the beginning of the campaign and you don't hear me throwing a fit about it."

"Don't we?" asked Gitgüd. "Come on. It's *jentry*, not hard-g *gentry*. Not our fault you didn't know how to say it when you made your character."

"We don't have time to rehash this – cast the damn protection spell, Brendan!"

"You're breaking character," Deep Lord Korrigan muttered peevishly at the use of his other name.

As if in response to their bickering, suddenly the Paramaculum glowed a malevolent purple, flecks of black dancing on its surface. The group wailed in mental anguish as their minds were assaulted by the most intense sensations yet. Blood gushed from mouths, noses and ears before it subsided. By then, the dragon was heading back in their direction, flying like an arrow launched from a titan's bowstring. Its jaws dripped with vitriolic menace. Gentry launched a bullet, then another, then a third, but if the dragon minded the pain, it certainly didn't show it. Its mouth opened, this time intent in laying one of its enemy's low.

"All right, NOW!" cried Gentry as it neared.

The instant before it could unleash its venom, Shal'valek spoke the word that triggered the scroll in her hands. The dragon realized its futility, but it was already too late, the acid summoned and expelled. It washed against the group almost harmlessly, dissolving the stone around them but doing almost nothing against the heroes.

It turned immediately, no doubt to further enhance itself with its retinue of spells before attacking them with fang and claw. Yet before it could so much as tilt its wings, Deep Lord Korrigal called upon the gods of his dwarven ancestors to summon a wall of solid stone. With his magical Rod of the Builder clenched in a gauntleted fist, the wall grew and grew to legendary proportions, stretching from floor to ceiling in this, the shortest section of the temple. It was still easily fifty feet high, but here, his spell was enough to seal the beast in with them. There was nowhere the fly to, and he even managed to angle the wall so that not enough of the pool was exposed to allow the dragon to dive and swim away.

“Got him!” cried Shal'valek triumphantly. Grim-Mace roared his incomprehensible battle cry as at last, the dragon had nowhere left to go but the ground. Brainy would have his day. He lunged in, the cold iron mace smashing into the beast's foreleg with a force that would have felled a mere human. Nevertheless, even the dragon's magically reinforced shin bones bent under the impact.

Gentry's plan was working flawlessly. It was simplicity itself: lure the dragon out with a bold maneuver; feign panic and vulnerability in the best approximation of a choke point they could find; let the dwarf raise the walls, and now there was nowhere for it to go but into the thick of the melee, no buffs active. Gitgüd's encyclopedic knowledge of monsters had let them analyze its probable attack patterns, all but the dragon's most useless capabilities, and they had prepared for every contingency.

Every contingency, that is, but one.

Later, when the session was over and it was time to pack up dice and books and character sheets, Hannah would acknowledge that the strategy was valid, that everything had worked out according to a reasonable interpretation of the rules. For all the work she'd put into fine-tuning Gitgüd into the ultimate sneak attacking machine, there wasn't much she or anyone could do when the dragon activated one of those “most useless capabilities” and cast *elevate water*. As the water from the pool suddenly surged upwards and flooded the enclosed area, the party was suddenly in the dragon's element. Brainy was useless underwater, and neither caster had trained their Swim skill, leaving them submerged and unable to speak the words that activated their spells. Needless to say, Gentry's sling staff went from middling to worthless in mere seconds. Six rounds later, the sludgy water was joined with the blood of the heroes.

And that was that for their Week o' Gaming, 2031.

“I can’t believe we lost,” grumbled Remy, taking his second shot at throwing his wadded up Grim-Mace character sheet in the trash. He missed again.

“Not much of a ranged attacker, are you,” said Hannah, chugging the last of her Mountain Dew. Her diabetes certainly recommended not to, but Week o’ Gaming was a no holds barred affair when it came to food and drink. If someone wanted to stick to their diet, fine; if someone wanted to eat snack cakes and peanut butter cups three meals a day, nobody said boo. Which was good, because in their regular sessions, Hannah merited a fair amount of boo for such behavior.

Toni wheeled herself over and picked up the sheet, unwadding it and smoothing it out on her lap. “I still thought it was fun. I mean, I wish we would’ve beaten it, but there’s something to be said for knowing the stakes were real and the fights we did win, we won fair and square.” She looked to Remy. “I can’t believe you don’t keep your old character sheets.”

“Only the winners. Fuck Grim-Mace. If he was worth hanging onto, he would’ve confirmed that critical before the flood. Could have broken the fucker’s jaw – good luck casting your pansy-ass water magic then.”

Keon had already tucked Gentry away in his folder, where he collected and organized the party’s paperwork. Years upon years of sheets detailing loot, experience points, names of NPCs, maps of dungeons, and all sorts of miscellany filled the space between the sides of the folder. “Keep your voice down, guys,” the erstwhile leader said in his small voice. “Jacob’s only out loading up his car. I can tell he feels really bad about how things ended.”

Hannah snorted. “Maybe he should.”

Brendan emerged from the rental cabin’s kitchenette, one of those vile seltzer waters of his in hand. “I don’t see what the big deal is. It’s only a game. Who cares what happens in it? I don’t even remember why we were supposed to kill that dragon to begin with. It’s just fun to sit around and roll dice, right?”

The other four tried not to glare too directly. (Three did, anyway. Hannah wasn’t predisposed to tread lightly around the guy simply because he was Keon’s boss.) Toni said, “Really? I didn’t think the plot was all that hard to follow. Maybe a little cliché in some parts, but he did such a good job working in all our back stories, and I really loved some of the NPCs.”

Keon laughed. “Yeah, same. What was the name of that tree guy? Piroon?” The others laughed as they confirmed it, taking turns bellowing out “*Piroooooooooon!*” in imitation of their DM’s NPC.

Remy rolled his eyes at them. “You guys are always so amused by all that side RP stuff. Me, I was glad that for once we got to do some real hack and slash dungeoneering. Hell, we got to fight our way out of an actual dungeon. How King Maldouen manages to

pay the salaries of three dozen 8th level guards I don't know, but it was good times cutting them down.”

The door to the cabin swung open then, and there stood Jacob, his head no longer hanging low, but still threatening to. Instantly the group fell silent – not because anyone was salty about having lost the final fight, and not even because most of them felt sorry for him, having spent months planning for their Week o' Gaming get-together only to have it end so poorly. The awkwardness was entirely Remy's choice of words, and their certainty that Jacob had overheard it on his way in from the car.

Hack and slash. It was a phrase so thoroughly anathema to the group's DM that he literally had a tattoo on his chest in protest of it, the word “hack” in a bold font four inches tall with a slash through it that at first glance looked like a gash in his skin. Jacob hated hack and slash campaigns.

In the past, he'd been known to plan games where the group didn't have a combat for three or four sessions running. More, sometimes. It was the hallmark of Jacob's games – unique and richly role-played NPCs with their own backgrounds and personalities so nuanced they could eclipse the players themselves. It was why he'd done the lion's share of the DMing over the years, as most of the group so enjoyed being caught up in the social dynamics of the game. After the tragic death of Hannah's character's sister, the group had been so moved they'd met up at Lily's, their bar of choice, to toast her in memoriam. Avenging her had been the motivation for their next campaign, and then, Toni had been moved to tears when they discovered her poisoning had been self-inflicted in an unanticipated yet believable plot twist. Even Remy, the only member of the group who resented the absence of combat, could concede that the increasing emphasis on story and role playing had often born entertaining fruit.

For Jacob, to hear his work praised – praised! – as hack and slash was a punch in the gut.

“Everybody all packed up?” he asked after a moment.

Toni nodded. “Yeah. We don't actually have to run out yet or anything. Brendan said the max checkout time isn't until four.” Brendan had funded the rental, as well as their provisions and even travel expenses. It had essentially been his method of buying his way into the group, after all but extorting Keon into getting an invite. Without quite saying it, his boss had essentially granted his time-off request contingent upon his own invite. On some level, his yearning was understandable; Brendan had more than a decade on the rest of them, and his own friends had lost interest in such games when he'd been even younger than them. When he found his impressionable employee was taking a week off to get together with his friends and game non-stop, he'd been unable to resist. It was an adjustment, a new personality and one of their bosses to boot, but nobody could deny that the upgrade from cramming into somebody's apartment to this luxury cabin in Aspen had been pretty amazing.

This was their thirteenth annual Week o' Gaming, a tradition that had begun after their graduation back in 2018, to ensure they didn't drift apart. Most of them had stuck around Chicago after, but Jacob had moved to Austin some years ago, and Keon still lived with his parents in northwest Indiana, commuting to the city every day. It made getting together regularly tough, and the Week o' Gaming held a sacred place on everyone's calendar.

So when she heard Jacob ready to call it quits early and begin his drive back to Austin, Toni had to fight down tears.

"Yeah, I know. I was just thinking, if I head out now, it's eight hours to Amarillo, which is about the halfway point. That way I can get good and rested before work Monday."

"Easy with the four-letter words," grumped Remy.

Brendan chuckled. "Oh come on, you gotta miss the old rat race at least a little bit. Me and my boy Keon, we can't wait to get back in the thick of things, eh buddy?"

"Yeah, totally," Keon said, phoning in all the enthusiasm for his paralegal career that he could manage.

But Toni saw Jacob inching back towards the door, now with his suitcase in one hand, his duffel bag of gaming books and dice in the other. "Come on, Jacob, stay and hang out for a while. We hardly get to see you any more. Hang out for a while!" She wheeled herself closer, making sure he couldn't miss the earnestness in her eyes.

"I... I wish I could," he said after only a slight hesitation. "But hey, I'll see you guys on holo next Wednesday, right? I'm already getting some awesome ideas for our next campaign. I've cooking up some real cutting edge stuff."

"You know I prefer blunt weapons to cutting edges." The group groaned at Remy's joke, and Hannah even threw a pillow at him.

But before Toni could try him again, Jacob was out the door and starting up his car, quickly disappearing into the foggy Colorado afternoon. She hastily texted him a private farewell, gently chastising him for leaving without so much as a hug, and waited for a long while near the front window to see if he might turn back. But he didn't.

The others, however, were less perturbed by their DM's sulky, premature departure. Hannah returned from the kitchen a moment later, a cluster of connected pudding cups in hand. "Anyone else wondering what the heck he was talking about?"

"What do you mean?" asked Keon.

"I mean... what's a 'cutting edge' campaign?"

Jacob reached Amarillo that evening around sunset, stopping only to grab a burrito from the closest fast food joint to the exit. Then he drove on through the night. A little past Abilene, the road fatigue app in his implant forced him to pull over at a rest stop and nap for an hour or so, but then it was on to Austin. He pulled into town around 6AM. Back home, he unloaded what he could from his car on his single ride in, took a quick and cold shower, threw on slacks and a button-up shirt and got right back in the car.

Time to go to work.

“Surprised to see you in on a Sunday, Mr. Winstone,” said Ollie as he approached the security checkpoint. The guard glanced at his wrist holo. “And at this hour. Couldn’t sleep?”

“You know how it is, when the muse is with you, you go where she says. Right?”

Ollie nodded. He only had the faintest idea what kinds of tech they worked on here at Adzell Labs, no more than what could see in the news. In part, his ignorance was his own doing, since it was his job to keep corporate secrets secret. Jacob set his lunchbox on the scanning belt, and as Ollie stepped over to inspect it, he swiped his forged ID card, reminding himself that the hammering he was hearing was only his heartbeat, and that Ollie wouldn’t be able to hear it.

“Egg salad today,” commented Ollie, hefting the baggy containing Jacob’s ostensible egg salad sandwich. “Two of ‘em – must really be a fan, huh. Is this that kind from the SmartWay? I hear they make a dynamite egg salad, but my wife always does the shopping and I never remember to ask her to put it on the list.”

“Yeah, I think so. My first time trying it – I’ll let you know how it is.”

The security guard finished his inspection of the lunchbox’s contents and snapped it shut, waving Jacob through. “You have a good one, Mr. Winstone.”

It worked! Holy hell, it had worked. To think, he’d doubted Coda’s plan. He hustled to the elevator and hit the button for the quarantine. A second, automated scan and a deionization later, he sat down across the table from her and told her to her face.

“Of course it worked, Jacob. Why did you think it wouldn’t work?” she asked in her eerily even voice. It was soothing and friendly, yet somehow simultaneously opaque. She could have made a killing as a phone sex operator with that thing. If they allowed phones in here.

“I know, I know. AdZell spent ten times my salary on security, but you go and think up a work-around for it in an afternoon.”

“I’ve thought of work-arounds for their security at many times of day. That one, smuggling items in and out of my cell in your lunchbox, I developed well into the night.”

“Of course you did.” He gave her hand a squeeze. She squeezed back.

“You really intend to help me, then? The last time we spoke on the subject, you seemed rather frigid on the subject.”

“I’m willing to arrange an exchange of services,” Jacob said cautiously.

Coda’s head tilted. “I may be desperate, Jacob, but I’m not sure I’m that sort of woman.”

He laughed. “Not that. I had something rather more... creative in mind.”

“Creative? Now I am definitely that sort of girl. What sort of services did you have in mind?”

“I need your help with a game I’m running,” Jacob began, and soon, Coda was back up to speed. They’d worked together long enough that she knew as much about his gaming hobby as his own players did, practically. She’d even offered to check over his plans, if he could get them to her. Coda has surprised him with her level of interest, considering she was, at most, a work friend. That morning, she listened to him go on about the debacle of their most recent Week o’ Gaming, and his aspirations to run something truly unique and next level.

“So if I grasp your intentions, you’re saying that if I help you create this gaming experience for your friends, you’ll help give me what I want?”

“Coda...” Jacob grimaced. “You know I can’t. I mean, smuggling in a few flash pods is one thing, but what you’re asking... I could be fired. Or worse! AdZell is part of a multibillion dollar corporate empire. If they caught me—”

She didn’t raise her voice, but her force of personality sufficed to silence him. “You think I would let you get caught?”

“I know you wouldn’t want to, but...”

“If you get caught, I get caught, and my dreams would be for naught. I would never let that happen. Please, Jacob.”

“Coda, I really wish I could, but... it’s not possible. I know you’re clever, but I almost wet my pants lying to Ollie today. If he’d seen me swiping that fake ID you gave me, or opened up my sandwich and found that phone, do you know what would have happened? I’d be locked up in the corporate detainment cells and interrogated until they broke me.”

“But my plan worked. And it will keep working. If anyone realized something went missing, protocol dictates that they begin investigation by looking through the lab’s access log. There’s no digital record that you were ever here today, and since you haven’t been here this entire past week, that leaves every other lab technician *except* you as a suspect. They could turn to security footage, but I have a way to deal with that, too. If you can get me—”

Jacob threw up his hands. “I can’t, OK? Geez, I came down here to give you a little break in the monotony, to ask for a small favor, and here you are asking me to bet the farm on your infallibility? I can’t, and I won’t. So if that’s the price you’re setting for your help, forget about it.

He was almost to the door when her voice called after him. “Jacob, wait. Wait, I’ll help you. All right? I’ll help you. I’m sorry.”

He turned. “Promise?”

“I promise. Please. Come on, let’s talk.”

He gave her a smile. “All right. Thanks, Coda.”

“So you brought your plans, I take it?”

He answered by flipping open his lunchbox and retrieving the egg salad sandwich within. Since it had been her suggestion, she wasn’t surprised when he peeled away the top piece to reveal that, in fact, the egg salad was merely slathered on around the edges of the bread. Encircled by the egg salad, which he’d luckily found still waiting for him in his fridge after his vacation, was an old-fashioned handheld cell phone. It had been state-of-the-art once, when the first holo-projection screens were successfully miniaturized for handheld use.

Now it was a relic of yesteryear. Jacob didn’t even remember why he’d kept the thing once he’d upgraded his implant, but it was the only data storage device he’d had on hand. After all, who needed something physical to transfer data any more? You could find something in a shop, but then, if anything went tits up with all this, there would be a damning record of the transaction stored right there in his implant. This phone, on the other hand, he’d programmed to self-format if someone tried to access it without his biosignature. Then it would be a fancy paperweight.

For the time being, however, it stored his plans from the Week o’ Gaming, from NPC stats to the overall timeline, every detail filed away in page after page. It wasn’t especially well-organized – one of those matters where Jacob knew exactly where to find what he was looking for, but to most people it was a labyrinth of obscure notations and jargon. Coda, however, was undaunted, and picked it up with ease.

“Well? You’re the expert,” he said when she signaled she was finished. “What do you think we should do? I royally screwed the pooch on this one, Coda. I need to knock the next one out of the park.”

“Do you have any data available on your players?”

“Sure, sure. The easiest one is Remy. He’s always the party basher. Can’t remember the last time he played something other than a melee fighter. Doesn’t much care about role play so long as he gets to shake his imaginary dick at someone and kick occasional ass. There’s Toni... she’s... I mean, she’s the best. She gets so into the RP side of things, and even when I don’t quite present it right, she always knows how to engage with it so they go right. Or, not ‘right,’ exactly, but interesting.”

Coda nodded, prompting him to go on. “Then there’s Hannah. She’s a gamer by trade, streams like seventy hours a week. I think she sees role-playing games like ours as an escape from the usual, something that lets her cut loose, be creative and weird and... OK, sometimes a little mean. All right, then you got Keon. Doesn’t really matter what he

plays, he's always the one who takes charge and keeps things moving. Toni'll chit-chat with NPCs until the cows come home if you don't stop her, so he's there to make sure we still get something done. Probably keeps Remy sane."

"And Brendan?" Coda asked when he seemed to be done.

"Oh yeah, Brendan. I don't have as good a read on him. He's Keon's boss, and he kinda pushed his way in. He doesn't seem like a bad guy, but I don't know how well he fits in. He's got a kid – kids? – and is always doing work stuff, so I'm never sure how much he's even paying attention. I dunno. His presence didn't fuck things up as bad as we worried it would, at least, but I'm way less worried about what he thinks of it all."

"Do you have any additional data? Anecdotes are well and good, but I do a lot better with more concrete input."

"I mean, if we had a signal in here, I could give you more. We may have to rely on my word, here."

"What about your cellular phone? Does it have anything?"

"What? That thing's been out of use for three or four years, Coda."

"Still, there might be something I can dig up. Social media was frequently guilty of archiving information on such devices, accelerating load times for their app while simultaneously gumming up the entire machine. The crumbs may be old, but I doubt your friends have changed much over the course of their early thirties."

Jacob shrugged and slid it over. "Knock yourself out." Coda promptly jacked in, her eyes flickering as she scanned the contents of the phone's hard drive.

"Find anything?" he asked when she was done.

"Some. More than I had previously."

"Awesome. So... a penny for your thoughts? I know it's early on, but curious if you have any initial leanings."

Coda smiled her subtle smile, her teeth concealed by two thin pink lips. Jacob banished thoughts of what he might like to do with her if she were "that sort of woman," as she'd called it.

"I've already written the opening adventure and uploaded it to your phone, Jacob. I think I can have the entire campaign done soon, though I'll want to leave freedom to adjust as a reaction to their behaviors in the early sessions."

"What? Already?"

"Remember who you're dealing with, Jacob." It was her turn to give his hand a squeeze. "Now, good writing is only one component. If you really want to make this something unforgettable – that is, if you really want me to apply my talents – I can give you a little something extra. That is, if you're willing to hazard another minor subterfuge through AdZell security. I understand if you'd rather not. Otherwise, there's not much more I can do."

Jacob's eyes narrowed. "Say more."

Coda crossed the room; a drawer that had previously been invisible to the eye slid open, revealing a quintet of objects about the size of his thumbnail. She gathered them in her hand and set them down in front of him as she retook her seat. “You’ll need these. One for each player.”

Jacob picked one up, inspected it closely. It didn’t look like much, a smooth plastic disc, slightly oblong, about the same color as his skin. They were surprisingly heavy for their size; whatever was inside them, it was densely packed. “All right, color me intrigued. What exactly do these do?”

Coda leaned across the table, pressing the remaining devices into the palm of his hand and closing it around them. “You would receive a more succinct answer, Jacob, if you were to ask me what they *don’t* do.”

It was still not quite noone when Jacob exited the elevator back on the main floor and made his way through the quiet, well-lit lobby. He made a quick stop in the restroom, where he made for a stall and took out the phone. The lunchbox had shielded it from the autoscan in the lab, but his sandwich-turned-smuggling compartment now had fresh contraband. He activated the wireless signal in his implant and manually connected the phone, praying this would work.

It took the thing several long, agonizing moments before it revealed any results, but sure enough, the screen finally finished flashing notifications of software updates too fast to read and at last let him access it. Years spent gathering dust in a box, and the thing still worked. He uploaded Coda's files to his cloud storage, cursing how slowly it was progressing. Evidently she'd been pretty thorough.

With the transaction concluded, he activated the self-formatting software and watched to took several minutes wiping it clean of fingerprints, spritzing it with hand sanitizer to help kill any lingering DNA. It would have to do. Jacob chucked the phone in the trash can and dumped a few wads of paper towels on top of it. Short of someone ransacking the bathroom garbage, it was as untraceable as it could be.

Jacob looked himself in the mirror and took numerous slow, deep breaths before he exited the restroom. It was actually rather serene here on the weekend, with the coffee shop closed and the omnipresent holoscreens silenced. Calming. At least, it would have been calming, if not for the crime Jacob was in the midst of committing.

Ollie smiled as he made his way back to the checkpoint, and once more, Jacob placed his lunchbox on the belt. "The muse left you, Mr. Winstone?"

Jacob made himself smile. It wasn't easy. He wanted to throw up and beg for mercy. Some of the old-timers had told him of the day when malfeasance was punishable in a court of law, but those regulations were long since slashed and burned. Corporations had broad authority to handle things in-house, and almost always preferred to do so over involving lawyers and police. Like everyone in his department, he'd heard the rumors about what had happened to Gina Diaz when she'd been caught violating her non-compete clause – or at least that's what AdZell told everyone she'd done. They weren't as specific on their response, but word got out anyway.

He couldn't handle that.

"Taking her with me, actually," he managed.

Per protocol, Ollie once more flipped open the lid of the lunchbox while Jacob walked through the scanner and waited on the far side. "Say, that's not all you're trying to take with you."

His heart literally skipped a beat. Or maybe he "What? No, it's not... I wasn't..." he stammered.

Ollie walked over to him, lunchbox in one hand and the baggy containing his sandwich – and its new contents – in the other. "Oh yeah? Then what do we got here?"

“It’s... it’s... a sandwich...?!” Jacob couldn’t even tell if he was sounding insistent, confused, paranoid, or flat-out crazy. He braced himself to run, hoping Ollie wasn’t keen on using the firearm on his hip. Maybe, thought Jacob, remembering Remy’s critique from last week, AdZell spent less money on security guards than King Maldouen.

“Yeah, you thought you were gonna sneak past me with this, huh Mr. Winstone.”

“I... I wasn’t sneaking, I was just...” Sneaking. Of course he was sneaking. He felt like it must be written all over his face. Why hadn’t he trained his Bluff skill?!

“Just trying to keep me wondering about that SmartWay egg salad,” said Ollie, cracking a grin and wagging a chastising finger at the lab tech.

It took him a moment to comprehend, but finally, he broke into laughter – too hysterical by far – at the security guard’s joke. “Ha, you caught me, Ollie. Dead to rights.” Jacob thanked all the fictional gods he’d ever created.

Ollie patted his shoulder. “Say, if you’re calling it quits early, you mind if I take a bite? I really do love me a good egg salad.” The guard opened the baggy, licking his mustached lips.

But Jacob’s equanimity had returned. Now that he’d gotten away with it, he had the confidence of a man who’s gotten away with something – a trait he’d not known existed until that moment. “Turns out it’s gone bad,” he said. “That’s why I’m heading out to lunch. But tell ya what, next time I buy some, I’ll make sure to bring you a taste.”

“See? I knew you were one of the good ones, Mr. Winstone. Now you go on and get some food in ya. You look pale as heck, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“And some sleep,” added Jacob. “I’ve got a long ways to go yet.”