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SELECT LIFE/DELETE/NEW PAGE

by

Jeremy Scherer

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing in Fiction

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Abstract

"The novella "Select Life/Delete/New Page" by Jeremy Scherer follows the story of Nopok, a young man who works in a computer lab while pursuing a political science degree. Lacking any direction in his academic or professional lives, Nopok suffers at home, where his parents use him and his brother Sammy as proxies to act out their obvious dysfunction. Nopok's only escape is his online life, where he finds meaning as a user on the gaming website Gamefaqs, where he provides people with gaming advice and fits into an odd, but endearing community of artists and gamers. When Nopok's mother threatens to disturb the delicate balance at home, Nopok dives deeper into his online life through a role play where he finds a surprising outlet for his emotions. As his family breaks apart, threatening to leave him with nowhere to turn, Nopok struggles to find new ways to connect with his family, using lessons from his positive online experiences to empathize with his parents and his brother. This character-focused novella explores the intersection of offline and online life in a 21st century context still reeling from the impact of Covid-19."

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Nopok navigated to the gaming forums and then glanced over his desk. Only an hour to closing time, and people were still at their computers, masks in varying states of coverage on their faces.

“This lab closes at five,” Nopok announced nervously. He looked away as people turned to acknowledge him. Few people ever spoke to the lab attendant. His interactions with the “customers,” as the admins upstairs called them, boiled down to mere glances and nods whenever they entered or exited the room. Awkward interactions, on a good day, were all that stood between him and his online life—his real life.

The political sciences lab attracted dozens of students at any given time. The University of Memphis was a commuter school, drawing in a diverse student body from rural and urban backgrounds. Students wore university brand tee shirts, high school pride tees with club names like “golden rule” math clubs or 4H club insignias. Today, Nopok looked around the lab and saw an international language festival tee, a Legendary Pictures film studio tee, and a few album cover shirts. He knew all the logos. He watched movies when he could and had built a small collection of music on iTunes. However, he could just never make small talk work, not in high school, not at the university, and certainly not at his job here at the lab. Students who came here needed silence, either to work on class projects or to chill out after a long day. Nopok understood how they felt. He was used to keeping people at a distance, if only to protect himself. At this point, this habit was more than a Covid pandemic routine: it was who he was, and there was no use in fighting his nature without a good reason.

Why change when he had safe spaces with Internet access—easy escape routes from a college landscape he traversed like a stranger?

His desk was backed close to the whiteboard, but angled so that no one else in the lab could see his screen. He had brought his own mouse, a Razer Basilisk gaming piece, from home, along with a custom mouse pad with a hummingbird design. His keyboard, a Razer Blackwidow Elite, glowed with red and green LED lights beneath the keys. The actual PC was a university Dell computer—old but functional—and Nopok checked it for malware every time he started his shift. He felt safe using it, at least safe enough to log in to his favorite gaming websites.

Luckily, the university had no explicit rules against using the computers for personal interests. Every student paid exorbitant technology fees, so Nopok figured that the fewer restrictions the school added, the less resistance they would get from the student base. Even with the apparent leniency, Nopok felt lucky to be able to delete his search and activity history at the end of every work day. No one needed to see his online habits, after all. Sometimes, he wished that he could wipe away other details from his life and then start over from a clean slate. Select life history, press delete.

If only it was that easy.

Before returning to the gaming site, Nopok scanned the students around him one last time, worried that someone might catch him slacking on the job. Managers at his high school summer jobs had expected him to be at full attention all the time, but this lab attendant position was different. He was, essentially, his own supervisor. It was easy in theory, but the paranoia from his old jobs remained. He froze in place for several minutes until he was sure that no one was watching—or, at least, satisfied that he was reasonably private in public.

A few clicks later, he was at Gamefaqs, a website that hosted video game walkthroughs and message boards. It had been Nopok's online home since high school. He had begun his interactions there on forums for old school games, classics like the Super Nintendo *Final Fantasy* games, and eventually branched out to forums for new releases of Japanese Role-Playing Games. The website focused on collecting info on games, such as box art, saves, and reviews, and although Nopok did contribute what he could, his heart belonged to the forum communities. The message board for *Final Fantasy IV* was his central hub, the home page on his cell phone, the site of his best written posts, and the only place online (or otherwise) where he had made real friends who remembered his name.

He scrolled through the list of threads and clicked a random one in the middle. The user who had posted it was asking for general advice on playing the game. Decades after the game's release, people were still struggling against the same flood-spewing turtle boss.

[Try lightning attacks], Nopok replied. Some time later, a moderator, Gizmos, followed up with two paragraphs detailing AI scripts.

A brief *[Thanks]* was all either of them got in response before the topic closed. Nopok couldn't help but wonder if the hour he had spent monitoring the topic had been worth it.

The topics posted by forum regulars were more varied. Evo97, a cornball user with a color Deviantart page, had posted a shipping thread in which the regulars debated what would happen if different characters in the game got together romantically. Everyone had their own wacky replies, and Nopok wanted to try his own.

[It's not a love triangle if five people are going at it lol], Nopok posted, hoping the humor would be obvious (while suspecting that it wasn't). A minute later, several derogatory comments from online trolls resulted in the topic's deletion.

Sometimes, topics would just end like that, leaving Nopok wondering if he had made any sense at all. He had been visiting the Final Fantasy IV forums for years now, since high school, and things were still difficult. Brief, to-the-point responses were the culture of the gaming site, which advertised itself as a source of advice and answers on games. Moderators attacked anything personal or “off-topic,” and seemed to operate based on vague descriptions of what those terms meant. Whole paragraphs of thought about games had disappeared over the years as moderators erased threads. Every deleted topic by the regulars felt like a loss, as nothing on the forum was archived automatically. Nopok, however, had tried to record everything onto Word documents since he first became interested in the forums. He had once sent a direct message, or DM, to another user who had been upset at their topic’s deletion.

[I’ve got the topic saved if you want it], Nopok said.

Two days later, the user replied, *[No, I don’t want it saved. Delete it, and please stop recording my posts].*

Nopok had felt like a creep at the time, and he never mentioned the documents again, although he continued to keep them, although only sparingly. The user had soon after disappeared from the forum, but not before leaving a rant against the mods. Later, Nopok checked the user’s name and found that they had been banned from the site completely.

Nopok had posted less for a week after that, afraid of being singled out as the next user to be culled.

As the time drew closer to five, Nopok hovered over several topics. One, a meme-posting topic, had been updated with custom artwork from a user called Camarilla.

[Great paladin], Nopok replied. He waited five minutes, then saw that Camarilla was not online. He moved on and checked the post popular thread of the day, one that had attracted the attention of multiple regulars.

At a glance, the thread revolved around a project from one of the regulars, a user called Typhoon. In a startup post titled “FFIV RP Interest Check,” Typhoon asked if anyone was interested in an online role play, or RP, using original characters. *[We’ll use the background world of Final Fantasy IV as a foundation,]* he explained. *[I’ll be playing the NPCs and other story characters. If you want to join in, all you need to do is post a character sheet and a backstory. Also, be prepared to have fun.]*

Nopok had spent most of his shift considering whether or not he should try it out. In high school, he had participated in several forum role plays at the website for Adult Swim, a branch of the Cartoon Network channel that showed *anime* and adult cartoons at night. Those RPs had been very short and followed the plots of *anime* shows like Cowboy Bebop. Players had taken on the roles of characters from the shows. Typhoon, in contrast, expected players to make original characters. It seemed like a lot of work, especially for users in a gaming forum.

Nopok couldn’t help but think about how his old role plays had ended. Personal drama between members had exploded into rants about misinterpreting characters from the shows. Nopok in particular had attracted the interest of community trolls, and it had gotten so bad in the end that he not only deleted his account at the Adult Swim site, but left social media entirely for a year. Even now, he sometimes had nightmares of former online friends from Twitter or Facebook finding him in real life.

Still, Nopok trusted the users in the Final Fantasy IV forum, and he respected Typhoon, whose walkthrough of the game had recently been top voted as the most useful guide in the

community. Nopok even modelled his earliest posts in the forum off of Typhoon's comments in the pinned "Rules" topic.

Nopok decided to read over the topic and then think about it. Better not to jump the gun on new commitments, not with a full courseload on his mind.

The story, according to Typhoon's introduction, would follow a typical Final Fantasy plot: magic crystals controlled the elements, dark forces sought to destroy the world, and only a destined few could save it. Every story beat was a cliché, but they were comfortable clichés. And besides, masterful storytelling wasn't the point—RPs were all about the interaction between users who shared interests. It also meant a lot that the RP would be run by a regular like Typhoon. He had a history of offbeat topics, from a weird dating sim brainstorming topic that had been swiftly deleted to a kind of game show where users could win art commissions from Typhoon himself if they got enough points (although, by Typhoon's admission, he could only produce primitive MS Paint drawings at best). On one hand, it was easy to think of the RP as the newest craze of the week from a user known for wacky ideas—ideas he rarely followed through on for very long. On the other hand, Nopok could not think of any better ways of keeping his mind off of school, work, and his home life.

A user named Luminous, another trusted regular, had already posted a character sheet. Nopok read it as the last of the students shut down their computers and left the lab.

Luminous's character was named Scott and he was a paladin, a type of knight with curing magic. A description provided details such as his height, five eleven, and his hair color, blond.

[He does what is right and believes in who he is], Luminous posted.

Typhoon replied by saying that the RP needed a character like that, but added, *[Keep a flaw or two in mind]*.

Nopok, meanwhile, struggled to imagine what kind of character he would play.

He checked the time and found that he only had a minute until five o'clock, the lab's closing time.

[Hey], he typed in his reply to Luminous, *[I'm thinking about playing, but I'm not sure about my character. I'll come up with one and post the sheet later]*.

Before he closed the lab, he loitered for another five minutes and checked the forum for replies.

[Sounds good], Typhoon replied. *[We need about five players. Choose a character class and personality. Try to be original]*.

Easier said than done, Nopok thought, though he replied that he would try.

* * *

Some time after Nopok closed the lab, he checked the Outlook app on his phone and saw that he had received an email. “Come to my office this afternoon,” his boss said in it. “I just want to go over your performance.”

Nopok assumed that someone had finally told her about how he spent his time on duty. He skulked around the political sciences building for nearly an hour, thinking about how to explain his habits, before finally finding his way to his boss’s office.

His boss, an assistant professor named Sandy Lamont, ran the department’s technology division. “It’s a big title,” she had told him, “but really, our ‘technology division’ is just you, Tony, and me.” Tony was an assistant secretary to the department chair, and his only involvement with technology involved wheeling television sets to classrooms that requested them. Sandy, meanwhile, handled classroom computers and projectors. Nopok, then, ran the downstairs lab—the basement, as the department called it.

It felt good working at the department. Nopok’s interests at the university had fluctuated between history and political science, and now that he was in his second semester as a sophomore, his gen-ed classes were nearly done. Classes on political thought felt intimidating, especially in his first semester’s remote learning classes, and with little parental support for his interests, Nopok struggled against a constant feeling that he did not belong in college. The job in the basement made him feel like he did.

Sandy’s office was on the fourth floor, between the main office and the faculty lounge. Nopok knocked on the door, and she called for him to come in. He kept the door open behind him.

“Hey, Jeff,” she said. “Come in and sit down.”

She gestured towards a beige office chair that was still wet from a disinfectant wipe-down. He set down a computer bag stuffed with books and sat.

Sandy’s eyes stayed on her computer screen as she spoke. “How are your classes going?”

“Fine,” Nopok said.

“What are you taking?”

“Music appreciation, biology, American literature, and modern political thought.” He realized after speaking that he had sounded robotic, listing off all his classes.

Sandy, thankfully, just nodded. “What a full schedule! How are you liking Professor Walters?”

“He’s tough,” Nopok said. The political thought professor, Dominic Walters, was difficult and made no secret of it. At the beginning of every class, he asked for written summaries of the previous session’s lecture. Four weeks in, and Nopok had already found himself bogged down by the writing requirement, and there was still the issue of Professor Walters’s tests. They were famously hard, according to Ratemyprofessor.com reviews.

“He sure knows his stuff, though,” Sandy said. “Next week, he’s giving a Skype address for the Montesquieu society in Germany. Did you know he does translation work?”

“No,” Nopok said. “He doesn’t talk about himself.”

“Are you interested in political theory?” Sandy asked. Nopok said yes, mostly to be polite, and she added, “You should ask him about his works on Montesquieu and Rousseau. They’re world famous, you know, his translation work. I’m surprised he stays at this university, to be honest.”

Nopok hesitated before replying. “I’ll try and read them sometime.” The pause was clearly awkward.

“Are you okay?” Sandy asked. “You sound a little tense.”

Nopok frowned. “I’m, uh, just not that good at talking to people. Sorry.”

Again, he realized too late how awkward he had sounded. Clearly, he had said too much. Sandy’s hesitant “oh” froze the entire room. She continued after a pause that seemed to last forever.

“That’s okay. Who’s good at talking to anyone anymore after the pandemic?”

“Yeah,” Nopok said. Months after the pandemic was officially “over,” people were still contracting cases across the country. He tugged at his mask, just to make sure it was on properly.

“If you can talk to him some time,” Sandy said, “I think it would be worth it. I think he still conducts office hours over Zoom. I can email him and say you’re interested.”

Nopok nodded and said, “I’ll think about it.”

Sandy finished something on her computer, and then turned her full attention to him.

“So, let’s talk about the lab work. How is that going?”

Not wanting to pause again, Nopok forced a response after a moment. “It’s okay.”

He knew that his tone was unconvincing. Sandy fidgeted for a brief moment before replying.

“Well, I’ve heard you’re doing a good job. We haven’t received any complaints. Not like the last attendant. Did I tell you about him?”

“I think so.”

Sandy leaned back in her chair. “He was a falconer, apparently. He even formed a club for it on campus. I think he still works with them as an alumni. Anyway, he used to bring his bird into the lab with him. You can imagine the trouble that caused.”

“I remember that,” Nopok said. He forced a smile.

“He also fought us over the mask mandate,” she said. Instantly, there was a nervous pause. Nopok could not tell whether he had caused it with a nervous gesture, or whether the topic itself was still too raw to be easily discussed in a professional setting.

So many things had changed during the pandemic. So many divisions had left scars on the survivors.

“Anyway,” Sandy said after clearing her throat, “you’re remembering to shut down the computers before leaving, right?”

“Yeah,” Nopok said.

“I think someone left the lights on once a few weeks ago, so remember to double check if you can. Admin is keeping track of little things like that these days.”

“I’m sorry,” Nopok said.

“No worries,” Sandy said. “I check it before I leave anyway, so if we both do it, that’ll keep things covered. Other than that, you’ve been perfect. Great job.”

Nopok just nodded, and there was a pause. “Thanks,” he added later than he should have.

Sandy looked back at her computer, and Nopok averted his eyes.

“So,” Sandy said, “that’s it for the job evaluation. I’ll write it up and send it to the main office. You just keep up the good work.”

Nopok assured her that he would, and soon after left the office, still on good terms.

As he waited on his father to pick him up, Nopok told himself that there had been no complaints. Everything was good.

However, a pang of anxiety still hit him. Sandy Lamont was the nicest boss he had ever had, the only one who had never tried to blame him for petty problems at work, like the managers at his old retail jobs. He knew that he couldn't screw this up. This job had to work out. For the first time in his life, he had easy and consistent part time work, and yet, he still felt nervous.

He wondered if that nervousness would ever go away.

* * *

Nopok was 21 years old and had never owned a car. His parents were poor: his father worked at a metal foundry in East Memphis and his mother worked at a FedEx packing plant near the Memphis International Airport. Neither of them had saved enough money to help their children afford decent vehicles, but they had pooled together just enough to help Nopok's 18-year old brother Sammy buy a junker from a used car dealership in Bartlett.

As Nopok rode home in his father's beat-up Toyota Camry, his father talked about Sammy's troubles. "Your brother's car cost \$2000 upfront and we've spent twice that to repair it. We just can't keep that up. It's a money sink."

He continued, leaving no room for Nopok to say more than "yes" or "okay:" just placeholder words that confirmed that someone was listening.

Nopok's father, James, had never learned to communicate well with his family, but he worked hard and seemed to believe that working was all that mattered in life. Somehow, though, he had never approved of Nopok's part-time jobs, even though he had pressured his son to get them, and he had never signed off on a political science degree. Just to keep things stable, Nopok had led his father on by repeating the lie that he would eventually switch degrees to business. Occasionally, he kept up the fiction by going to talks by guest speakers and taking notes.

Sometimes, his father gave him a hard time about not doing enough to get the ball rolling on the degree switch, but today, the ride home focused entirely on Sammy, who was dating someone in the high school flag corps, apparently. Or at least claimed he was: their father repeated over and over again that he did not believe it.

“If they’re dating,” he said, “why haven’t we seen the girl?”

After they pulled up to the house, Nopok unfastened his safety belt as quickly as possible and hopped out. His father leaned over before he could close the door.

“What about that, uh, boss of yours? What was her name?”

“Sandy Lamont,” Nopok said.

“Is she cute?” his father said. Nopok said nothing. His father exited the vehicle and walked closer. “Come on, she’s cute, isn’t she?”

“I don’t know,” Nopok said.

His father looked confused. “What do you mean you don’t know? Is she or isn’t she?”

“I guess.”

“Is she available?”

His father was giving him a serious look. Somehow, his father managed to be serious during so many light-hearted conversations, and then be too light-hearted during the serious ones.

“I wouldn’t know,” Nopok said. He started walking to the door.

“You haven’t even talked to her, have you?”

Nopok stopped on the front porch and waited for his father to catch up.

“Have you talked to her?” his father said.

“Of course I talk to her,” Nopok said. “She’s my boss.”

His father shook his head. “Does that matter? If she’s cute and if she’s available, why don’t you ask her out?”

Nopok froze and said nothing. He just stood there, not looking at his father, and waited for the awkward moment to be over. After a moment, he heard a frustrated sigh from his father, who cut ahead of him to open the front door.

The second he was inside, Nopok ran upstairs to his room and locked the door behind him. Privacy, in his parents' house, had to be enforced by physical barriers.

Nopok's home computer was a dinosaur of a PC, barely able to run programs without stuttering. The family's wi-fi plan with Comcast was on the lower end of the spectrum, and Nopok's parents controlled access to the Ethernet cables. Sometimes, Nopok could sneak into their room and borrow it, though the process was tedious and often came with a time limit.

After logging in, Nopok began his daily routine of accessing his Google Drive and downloading all the files he had collected during his workday onto the folders on his desktop. Today's files from his lab time were mostly photos he kept in individual file folders. Early on, he had developed his own way of organizing his online file collection, and he preferred to have files on both his own computer's hard drive and on the Cloud, just so he would have multiple backups.

He had even made separate folders for files and records he kept from his time on the Final Final IV forum. One folder contained Camarilla's Paladin art, along with some of her DeviantArt images of other *Final Fantasy* characters. Another folder held fanart from a Google Search for "fantasy classes." The last folder consisted of Word document files recording the day's new topics on the gaming site. Everything went into a larger Gamefaqs archive, which contained topics from ten different game forums: five RPG games, three flight simulator games, and a pair of old action platformers.

Today, he had also expanded into a new corner of Gamefaqs. Sometimes, he browsed more obscure games, looking for deserted forums where he could do whatever he wanted without the supervision of site moderators or admins. Today's forum was for an old Commodore 64 game called *The Raid on Bungeling Bay*. The forum had been empty, so he had started his own topic entitled "No One Here." It had felt comforting, safe even, to read his own topic on a

board that would never be touched by the site's moderators. No matter what happened on the other boards or at home, he would have a quiet corner of the Internet to go back to, a safe space within his safe space.

With his safe space and files copied onto his desktop and stored away where no one would ever touch them, Nopok checked the clock. It was already past seven, and no one had called him for dinner. Maybe, he thought, today would be a lazy day, meaning no family dinner and no attempts at a good Mormon "family home evening." For a while, he stared at his bedroom door, afraid of the sound that he knew would eventually come: the voicing of his name. He knew it would come, and still, he felt unprepared for it when his mother yelled his name from the bottom of the steps.

"Jeff! Come down here."

He could hear tension in her voice. She and his father had probably been arguing about something again. The two of them seemed incapable of living together without fighting over the pettiest things. At his age, Nopok felt that it was no longer any of his business to know what it was about. They were adults and so was he. Surely, he thought, they could all coexist, even if they were family.

He opened his door and yelled, "Coming!" He lingered in his room for a moment, full of dread, and then descended the stairs.

Coexisting: there was another concept that was easier said than done.

The dining room was arranged in a tiny square area just outside the kitchen. Nopok's father had once tried to argue that it was not the right room for the dining area. "Too small," he had said, "especially now that the kids are grown." However, his mother had refused to give in.

“I’m not changing it,” she had said. “This is the dining room, it’s always been the dining room, and that’s how it’s staying.”

Nopok’s father had relented, as he always did. Nopok had almost never seen the man defend his own assertions to the bitter end.

The family ate dinner at a circular table that was too close to a chest cabinet full of silverware. Often, the one closest to the cabinet was forced to stand up and move their chair whenever the one seated to their left needed to get up. Nopok could already see that Sammy had taken the left seat, and his parents’ plates were at the other two open seats.

Nopok was used to taking the worst seating position. Once, his father had even apologized for making him sit there so often, but over time they had all just gotten used to the arrangement and no one commented on it anymore. Who could dare disturb the peace when every disagreement became an argument, and every argument caused a family crisis?

As Nopok sat down, he barely fit into his seat properly. His knees pressed up against the underside of the table and his feet propped up against the base. He tried to avoid looking uncomfortable, at least, but failed even at that. And Sammy was watching, nervous.

“Looks like somebody’s putting on weight,” their father said.

Nopok said nothing. He furrowed his brow, if just to show indignation. Sammy grinned, apparently finding the gesture funny. Or maybe he was just too tense to do anything else. Smiles were a way of maintaining consistency, a reminder that everything was okay, no need to get upset.

It was amazing, Nopok thought, that everyone could tear each other apart while smiling, and then move on without acknowledging a word. His emotions were more lasting than that. He wondered if anyone in the family really got over what they said to each other.

“Not at the table,” Nopok’s mother said listlessly, giving a rare response to a personal insult. She stood at the oven staring blankly at the timer.

“Yes, honey,” his father said, pulling out his phone. Nopok drew out his, and then Sammy followed.

When their mother noticed, she said, “No phones at the table either.”

No one put their phones away, and she said nothing else. After some time, Nopok’s mother came in with the food and put it on the table without saying a word.

“Pork roast,” Nopok’s father said, sounding tired. “Smells good.”

“I don’t eat pork,” Nopok said. His father rolled his eyes.

“There’s yogurt in the fridge if you want it,” his mother said.

Nopok froze. Once again, his parents had not remembered what he ate. Or maybe they no longer cared. He stood up and got the yogurt, an old sugarless Greek-style cup, out of the refrigerator and grabbed a spoon to eat it with. As he turned to go back into the dining room, his mother said, “We made some mixed vegetables too.” She pointed at the bowl. Once again, his mother had not put spices on the vegetables, and they were boiled so soft that had turned to mush in the bowl.

Another old habit of dinner, unfortunately, was to avoid adding anything to the food. Flavor came after the cooking process. Nopok had a theory that his mother and father had started the practice in order to avoid complaints about how the food tasted. Instead, the family placed an array of sauces and spices at the center of the table.

“Thanks,” Nopok said flatly. He added a few vegetables to his place, poured a dollop of Italian dressing on them, and then returned to his seat. Everyone ate for five silent minutes before a timer went off, and Nopok’s mother retrieved a bowl of dinner rolls to complete the spread.

Nopok added olive oil to the rolls and waited for the atmosphere to change. Once everyone had food, his father began the customary prayer.

The Mormon dinner prayer, as Nopok's father performed it, was bland and predictable, with no variation from day to day.

“Our heavenly father, we thank thee for this day. We thank thee for the many blessings that thou hast given us. We ask thee to bless this food, so that it will nourish our bodies and strengthen us. We ask these things in your name, holy father, in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

Nopok's mother voiced an amen, but neither Nopok nor Sammy did. They all began eating, though Nopok did so slowly, hesitantly. Too much noise, and he could expect criticism for noisy eating. Everyone stared at each other, waiting to see who would be the first to attract attention.

Something Nopok did, maybe the way he chewed, attracted the first volley.

“So,” his mother asked, turning to him first, “tell us about how your work went, Jeff.”

“It's fine,” Nopok said, not sure he needed to say anything further.

“You say that every time I ask you about it,” she countered. Nopok noticed that she had an irritated look in her eyes. Something was off today. “How is it really?”

“It was fine,” he said. “My boss said I was doing a great job.”

“So you *do* talk to her,” his father said. Sammy grinned.

First blood had been spilled, conversationally. With a target on his back, Nopok began eating faster.

“What do you do there?” his mother asked.

“Just help with computers,” Nopok said.

“What kind of help?” Her tone was harsher than usual. His father averted his eyes to a window in the kitchen.

“Mostly fixing printer issues,” Nopok said nervously. Just today, he had cleaned out two paper jams.

“What issues do you run into?” she asked.

Sammy shook his head. “He’s just the lab assistant, mom. What do you think?”

“Quiet,” Nopok’s father said. “Let him answer the question.” Sammy looked down at his food and said nothing else.

Nopok’s hands were trembling.

“The printer gets jammed,” he said. “Sometimes the toner goes out. I’m the only one around when issues like that happen.”

“I’m sure you help the other students there too,” his mother said. “Isn’t that right?”

“When they need me to,” Nopok said.

“Good,” his mother said. “You’re finally meeting people.”

“Yeah,” Nopok’s father said, too loudly.

His mother snapped at that. “Do the people where masks there? Are you going to give us all Covid?”

“No,” Nopok began, stuttering. “I mean yes, they wear them. Everything’s fine.”

“Almost a million Americans are dead,” his mother said. “What’s fine about that?”

The longest silence followed.

Sammy took advantage of the pause to begin talking about his work. Nopok grimaced, jealous of his brother’s opportunity. During tense moments like this, the best thing you could do was to preempt work talk before someone else started it.

Sammy talked about how had been offered the assistant manager's job at the local Kroger. Nopok's parents were quick to congratulate him, he seemed to enjoy the attention. Or maybe he was just happy that he had dodged the kind of bullet that had shot straight through Nopok.

Nopok's hands were shaking so much that he dropped a few green peas on his pants. By the time Nopok was done with the yogurt, Sammy had asked his dad about his job, and his dad was explaining a complex technical task from the foundry without clarifying any of the jargon. It was all something about programming a machine to make precise cuts in stainless steel blocks. Surely, it meant something to somebody.

"I'm done," Nopok said after a very brief pause gave him room to speak. "Can I go now?"

"Too busy to listen?" his father said, clearly annoyed.

"I've got a lot of reading to do," Nopok said. "College work."

"Go on," his mother said, sounding defensive. "Do your homework, if that *is* what you do up there."

Alluding to the work load of college classes was one of Nopok's only get-out-of-jail-free cards in dinner conversations, and he played it near the end of every meal.

"Sorry to get in your way, Jeff," his father said sarcastically.

Sammy, for his part, just nodded and then looked away.

Nopok stood up, washed his dish in the sink, and then walked upstairs. Everyone watched him as he left, but no one spoke to him, and he did not listen to hear the topic of their next conversation.

An hour later, his mother sent a text asking him to come see her downstairs. He walked down to the first floor wishing that she had explained what she wanted to talk about.

She was sitting in the den, alone. The door to Sammy's room was closed. His father's keys were missing from the key rack near the front door.

As Nopok walked into the den, his mother gave him an exhausted look.

"Come on," she said. "Sit down."

She watched him sit on the recliner across from the TV. The television was off, which made Nopok certain that something was wrong.

"What's going on?" he asked. She hesitated before answering. For a moment, Nopok thought that he could see her trembling in her seat, afraid, but she straightened up suddenly and looked so confident that he was sure that he had the wrong impression.

"I want you out of this house," she said.

A lump grew in Nopok's throat. "What?"

"And before you say it, I know you don't have a car. I know you can't move out. But I want you out. You can come back to sleep here, but that's it."

"Mom," Nopok started, but a fierceness in her eyes made him go quiet. He knew the look when she had something to say and needed to say it, no matter what. And yet, she hesitated.

"You don't ever say anything, anything at all, and you sneak around here and there, and I am tired of it. I won't be on edge in my own house, never again, certainly not because you're being sneaky. Your father will drop you off somewhere after school, and he'll get you at night, no earlier than 9 pm. Remember that: 9 pm. If he's too busy or lazy to drive you, you can walk."

She stopped. Nopok said nothing. Had she really just called him sneaky?

"We're going to look for a car for you. Sammy will help pay for it. And once we find you one, you can move out, so start saving."

The most horrible feeling welled up in Nopok's stomach. He spoke before he could even think, and he spoke out of anger. "What about Sammy?"

"He's moving out too, and unlike you, he has a car and money."

Nopok froze up, unable to speak.

"That's all I have to say. Just go upstairs and go to sleep."

And Nopok trudged up the stairs, limp as death.

* * *

On the drive to school the next morning, Nopok's father was unusually silent until they stopped by the McDonalds on Highland Avenue. Somehow, the routine of ordering food and a coffee never failed to get his father in a mood to talk.

"Here you go," his father began as he handed Nopok his portion: a sausage biscuit and a hash brown. No drink.

"Thanks," Nopok said glumly.

"No problem," his father said as got them on the interstate. After a moment, he sighed. "Well, your mother explained to me what she said. I guess she fired the first blow on this one, huh? She didn't have to threaten you like that, though."

"Yeah," Nopok said. "She didn't." After a moment, he added, "Where were you when it happened?"

"You know where," his father said. Neither of them said anything for a moment. "Look, I know what she said, but your mother has just got a lot on her plate. I don't think she meant everything she said."

"She's going to kick me out," Nopok said. His father sighed.

"Yeah, she pushed for that real hard."

"When?"

"Before I picked you up. We talked on the phone for a long time."

"What did you say?" Nopok asked. "Did you tell her no, that I should stay?"

His father hesitated before answering.

"I tried. But your mother, you know, she didn't want kids."

“I know,” Nopok said. The old family drama had been evoked. There was no stopping his father now.

Nopok’s father rubbed his hands over the steering wheel. “I’m sorry. I was the one who wanted a family. I pushed her to have you.”

Nopok said nothing. His father bit his lip and muttered something under his breath.

“We were so sure you were going to be a girl. We even had a name picked out. Jessica.”

“I’m sorry,” Nopok said, not quite knowing why he had said it. No matter how many times they had this conversation about how the family had started, it never felt right to discuss it so casually. Discussions about who had even wanted kids had popped up early in Nopok’s life, too early. He remembered brief moments when he was five of his mother retreating to a bathroom and crying as she said, over and over again, that kids had been James’s idea, not hers.

A family had never been the plan for them. He had forced that on her, and her life had never been hers since.

“No,” Nopok’s father said, “you don’t have anything to apologize for. I’m the one who screwed things up. I’m always the one who screws things up. God...”

His father cried. Nopok waited a moment, just to give him a moment, and then put a hand on his father’s shoulder. “It’s okay, dad.”

“I’m such a fuckup,” his father said. He briefly raised his foot off the brake and the car stuttered forward, almost jolting back onto the road and into oncoming traffic. After a moment of fear (and relief that they were both still alive), Nopok’s father parked the car into a lot adjacent to McDonalds and sobbed into the leather of his steering wheel.

“She’s going to leave me. I know she is.”

“It’s going to be okay,” Nopok said. “That’s not going to happen.”

There was a pause. His father said nothing. Nopok searched for something positive to say, anything at all. “Thanks for...for sticking up for me. You always have my back, and I have yours.”

“Yeah,” his father said. Nopok was dead certain that he needed to say more, that anyone in his father’s position needed more support than that, but before he could speak again, his father exited the lot and began the drive back to the university.

“You could try to be nicer to her,” Nopok’s father said. “Be sincere about it this time. Say whatever you have to. Lie. she doesn’t believe my lies anymore, but maybe she’ll believe yours. Then, maybe she’ll let *you* back in, and you can put in a good word for me.”

“I’ll try,” Nopok said. He thanked his father again before leaving the car and standing on the sidewalk, too rattled to move until the whoosh of a speeding car jolted him back to reality.

* * *

Nopok knew he had written a half-assed report for his political thought class—how could he have done anything else considering the situation at home? No matter how much he wanted to cover it up, there was no hiding it this time. When Dr Walters asked for papers, Nopok handed in his report and expected the worst.

Dr. Walters paced back and forth in the front of the classroom, skimming through papers. Sometimes, if a badly written summary caught his eye, he would begin the lecture by expressing his disappointment. Loudly.

After a tense moment, Dr Walters slipped the papers onto the front desk and walked to his computer. Nopok let out a sigh as he recognized the sign for what it was. There would not be a rant before class today. Everyone looked relieved.

Nopok had missed being caught, at least for now. However, Dr Walters would read the paper eventually. Nopok made a note to go to his professor's office hours the next day and explain what had happened. For now, he sat through the class quietly, taking notes on Montesquieu's opinions of Japanese and Middle Eastern governments.

After the lecture let out, he paused for a moment at the door and looked back. Dr Walters hovered over his computer, furiously typing as he saved the class notes for the day, which he had written in an open Word document as discussions happened in real time. Nopok had never seen anyone type so fast, or do it so openly.

Today wasn't the right day, Nopok decided. Eventually, he would meet Dr Walters in his office, but right now he was still too stressed out by what had happened with his parents. It was

taking everything he had not to think about them, or where he would even go after school if his mother wanted him out of the house until later that night.

With his political science class out of the way, all he had left was the lab. Escape sounded good right now.

A short walk downstairs, and Nopok arrived. A few students were even waiting next to the door to get in, some with masks, some without. The ones wearing masks looked to him as if they expected him to establish order, but he was not in the mood. He keyed the code into the security console and unlocked the door. The students continued to wait, but he just walked inside and turned on the lights.

After an awkward pause, everyone shuffled off to their computer tables without any obvious efforts to social distance. The stickers designating the required distance to maintain had worn down too much to read, and it had been months before the university leadership had even mentioned pandemic policies.

That, obviously, was another detail Nopok would never mention to his mother.

Once inside, Nopok dove into his routine of turning on computers, checking the printers, and replacing cleaning supplies around the room. After calming down a little, he settled into his desk, ready to think about anything else but his life outside the forums.

Right away, something was off. For some reason, Nopok's browser remembered the link to the gaming site. Normally, shutting down the computer should have deleted the browser history. Nopok made a mental note to delete the history manually before he left, just to make sure. After all, he didn't want the people from IT or administration finding out about his browsing habits. Who knew what they would think?

After this morning, he wanted to reduce unnecessary risks to zero wherever he could.

Before Nopok could even open the gaming site, his phone buzzed. A text from his mother showed on his lock screen.

“Don’t forget: 9 pm.”

The worst feeling plunged down Nopok’s throat. He minimized the window of his browser, set his arms on the desk, and leaned into them.

Reality had a way of coming back to him at the worst times. He couldn’t help but question what he was doing. Was forum activity just a waste of time? The worst thoughts rushed through his head, the first in his mother’s voice, the second in the voice of his father.

“Look at this. Instead of studying your major, here you are frittering away your time online. What the fuck, Jeff?”

“Who are these people you’re talking to, Jeff? Forum friends? How many times have you even talked to them? In real life, Jeff, not on the Internet!”

Demon voices followed him everywhere. Nopok seethed a hot breath into the sleeves of his shirt and cried.

The truth was that he had no real friends. None of the people he could tolerate in high school had gone with him into the same university, and the new people he was meeting in college classes were just acquaintances. It took effort to make friends, and Nopok could not speak with them any better than he had with his high school peers, leaving him to wonder if *any* of the students in his other classes shared his interests. Did they care about him at all? There was a good chance that he would never know. He was too afraid to even ask.

His frustration at not connecting with people in real life was the reason he had turned to gaming sites like Gamefaqs. But even there, he hesitated before saying anything, and he was always guarded. It was the same way he had failed to build relationships his entire life. He could

never get the right words through, and people online were so quick to jump on you if you said the wrong thing.

If he couldn't make things work with his family, who were obligated to love him, what gave him a chance at connecting to people on an online forum, where every comment was monitored for its "relevance" to the site's intended purpose: help with playing video games?

Yesterday, he had seen the RP topic as a fun opportunity, but now, all he could think was that it would probably get taken down eventually anyway. Gamefaqs was no a playground: it was a business site, a carefully curated environment. The moderators had taken down other community efforts to have fun. What was the point of trying to make this one work?

He right clicked his browser's tab. With another click (and then a quick dismissal of the warning window), he could close it now and not get involved. Sure, he had told Typhoon he would post a character sheet, but the regulars would get over it. Really, Nopok was barely even there in the community. To them, he must have seemed pathetic or needy. Most of his posts were just rushed attempts to answer random questions quickly. Who was he trying to impress with them?

Surely, anyone would see through him. His family did. Maybe it was time to focus on his major. He could write his summary for Dr. Walters's class now, maybe make something of his time in that class. Political science was a rare subject that had gotten through to him. His high school civics teacher had caught his attention, shown him that politics was a world bigger than the pettiness of his parents' constant fighting. It was sure as hell bigger than the blank slate of his own life.

If only Covid had not happened. If only the divide between people in the country had not exploded out of control, and made even thinking about politics remind him of his mother, of her

bitterness toward the world. The word politics was now life and death. Every opinion was wrong to someone, and what did it matter if you could back up what you believed? The trolls would find you. Your words would offend someone, usually someone close. His family situation was at the breaking point already. He didn't need something like politics to make things worse.

It felt odd, never discussing his college major with his family, or with anyone really. His parents expected him to switch to the business school. Nopok knew that if he followed up on that lie, he would be eaten alive. Political science was his only chance, and he could barely even think about it without breaking down. And what did it matter if he read books like *The Leviathan* or *On the Spirit of the Laws*? Montesquieu and Rousseau could never have imagined Covid, or social media, or the great divide threatening to split the United States in half.

Nopok had read those books listlessly, just as he had done with *The Bible* and *The Book of Mormon* earlier in his life. His religious life, or what was left of it, was just as hollow as his smiles at the dinner table. Good Mormons didn't keep shrines to anime-styled characters from games in their closets. Good Mormons didn't wish that they looked like those characters, boy and girl, not knowing where they belonged. And good Mormons certainly didn't masturbate to pictures of shirtless paladins with glistening white hair or green-haired summoners with fully exposed legs.

Nopok moved the reticule of his mouse over the Delete key. It would be so easy to quit this video game nonsense, he told himself, and correct his path in life. His parents had told him so many times to do exactly that. If he did, maybe he could assert himself in his classes, perhaps even work up the courage to talk to Dr. Walters. Even something as big as politics, surely, could be easier to learn if he could just get contacts. His father had told him the value of friends and networking his entire life. Every good job his parents ever got had come from knowing someone.

His father's job at the foundry had come from knowing the brother of his manager. His mother had once dated her manager at the FedEx warehouse.

There was no way Nopok could get a job by dating anyone, male or female (he considered himself bisexual, for what it was worth), but maybe he could get a professor's attention, or that of an advisor. There seemed to be no other path for him, career-wise, than finding someone to help him at the university.

And yet, nothing at the university made him happy. Nothing at home made him happy. Even masturbating, his sole physical release, only brought him closer to what really made him happy: video games. Playing them allowed him to cool off after the day's work was done. Talking about them gave him a sense of community. And role play was a different kind of interaction with video games: more personal, more intimate.

After a pause, Nopok looked at the time on his phone. It was still eleven: there were six hours left in his shift. He looked around at the lab. Less than half of the computers were occupied, and most of the students were actually wearing masks today. No one had asked for help. No one seemed to need it. He stood up, went over to the printer at the far end of the room, and checked the paper. It was somewhat low, so he refilled it. Then he checked the toner. Still nearly full. The IT people from admin must have taken care of it during off hours.

Going through his routine gave Nopok a sense of calm. He walked back to his desk, feeling that all of his duties to the lab were done, and then looked at the browser tab.

This was what made him happy. The forum. Not reading Hobbs and Montesquieu, but playing games about heroic knights defeating evil wizards. He opened the window again and scrolled down.

* * *

The *Final Fantasy* forum had only a handful of new threads. Nopok checked the help topics first. In one, a new user to the site was asking what version of the game the community recommended. Nopok replied that he preferred the original, but if someone was playing from a Rom file, it was best to play version 1.1. Another topic covered a difficult late-game boss, a demonic wall that relentlessly attacks the main party of characters. Nopok recommended more leveling up. Very standard advice. The last topic was another Evo97 topic, a daily rumination about the game's lore.

[Where do you think the country of Baron got their airship technology?] she asked.

Gizmos, the only moderator who ever bothered to reply to topics by the regulars, gave a snappy answer. *[From whatever anime the writers were watching.]*

Evo, to their credit, seemed to take the comment in stride, answering only with a *[lol, probably.]*

With no one else replying, Nopok thought it might be a shame to let the topic die with that kind of an answer.

[We know who invented the airship,] he replied, *[It was Cid. But even though he's portrayed as a genius, I think there's more to it than that. Cecil's father is from the moon, right? There's no way he didn't contribute. I say that even though Cid invented it, the base technology is from the moon.]*

[Alien technology!] Evo replied. *[Yes! Perfect!]*

Nopok couldn't help but smile. It was the most excited reply he had ever gotten from Evo. Also, it was a much better way of ending the topic.

He then moved on to the role-playing topic. Since the previous day, there had been fifteen new replies. It was probably the most activity he had ever seen in the forum in a single day, maybe the most since the last remake of the game had come out. He was almost afraid to read the topic. What if Typhoon had moved on too far for anyone to still join in?

Nopok pulled up page one, rereading the explanation of the role play. It would be play-by-post format, with each user portraying their character through a mix of dialogue and description. Nopok had not written anything serious since a few fanfictions back in high school, so he wasn't sure about how his posts would go, but Typhoon assured everyone that no one would expect perfection.

[Just think of your character and describe what they do, and you'll be fine.]

Nopok suspected that it all came so easily for Typhoon. He wondered what the user's posts would even look like, and dreaded that they would be good: too good. Nopok scrolled down to the new messages fearing that he would be discouraged by what he saw.

Luminous had added details to his Paladin character. The knight would be young, barely even eighteen, and still exploring the world. As a prince, his experience outside the realm of politics was limited, and he wanted to change that.

His name would be Scott. The picture of him would be Camarilla's Paladin art from the previous day. The artwork that Nopok had already gone to sleep thinking of.

Nopok just stared at the screen for a moment, again admiring the art. The man looked just like the protagonist of the game: with a muscular, wiry build, long flowing white hair, and golden armor. There was no way the man could ever exist. People like Nopok's father believed

in ideals like that—even Aristotle had his philosopher king—but Nopok felt that no one could ever really live up to it. After reading Hobbs’s *Leviathan*, the one idea he was still struck was of the state of nature not being some beautiful thing, but a nasty and solitary existence, and that people might descend into horrible living conditions without some order to guide them. The idea had reminded him of the pandemic, of how close the country seemed to a complete breakdown.

Remembering Hobbes gave him an idea. He pulled up a word document and began trying out details for a character sheet.

His character would be solitary, a foil to Luminous’s perfect man. Unlike the lawful knight, this character would believe that society was doomed by default, that the only reasonable way to live was to look out for yourself and no one else. If the role play was going to follow a fantasy story, Nopok knew the perfect archetype for it: the rogue. He pulled up a random name generator and scanned a list of twenty names, most of them male.

For a moment, he tried to fit the names to the image of his character he was building in his mind, but none of them matched. After some time, he wondered if playing a male character was even the right decision. In most games, Nopok always preferred to play female characters. Once, he told himself that it was to avoid playing as anyone who reminded him of himself. He had never been happy with his body. Years ago, he had explored other possibilities, wearing his mother’s dresses, for example. At 14, he had used her credit card to order a bra, and liked how it changed his figure when he stuffed it. But his parents had found him out, shamed him into keeping his hair short, and they had thrown away the bra. He had never felt comfortable trying things like that again, not in person, but he had role played female characters in high school before online trolls drove him away from trying anymore.

It was too controversial, apparently, to admit to anyone online that you were not comfortable in your own body, in your own gender. It had been easier to walk away from the fight and stop thinking about it.

To think that he had chosen politics for a major, but was unable to even articulate his own thoughts about his identity. *Pathetic*, he told himself.

In the random name generator, he brought up a list of twenty random female names and read them slowly, whispering them to himself, until one of them caught his eye: Clair. The image of her formed instantly: a woman in green and tan clothes, hiding long, wild black hair behind a green bandana, with a kukri dagger tucked into a leather sheathe at her belt. Nopok wrote the description, felt proud of what he had created, and then moved on to her backstory.

Typhoon's posts after Luminous's expansion of his character gave a short summary of the RP's story. The world would take place on one similar to *Final Fantasy IV*. The player characters would meet near a castle and be given a quest by the four crystals, a set of guardians of the elements. An evil empire would be threatening to destroy the delicate balance of magic in the world, and only the chosen of the crystals would have the power to stop them. It would be a story following the most recognizable clichés for the series, and that was the point.

[I want it to be familiar,] Typhoon said, *[Our characters will make it unique.]*

Luminous agreed, as did a few other users on the forum. Camarilla, late last night, had dropped by to say she was interested in making a character, as was Evo97, who promised to make the group's comic relic.

[Wonderful,] Typhoon replied. There was no way to tell if he was being sarcastic. Evo replied with an emoji sticking out its tongue.

Surprisingly, Gizmos had even dropped by to say he liked the idea of the RP.

[I hope our topic is 'relevant' enough,] Typhoon replied, obviously probing the moderator's intentions.

Nopok was glad someone had mentioned the fear they all probably had, that the mods would take the topic down before it even got started. He wasn't sure if he could have asked that directly.

[I'm sure it's fine,] Gizmos said. *[RPs increase forum activity in a good way. It could be fun too.]*

[Feel free to join if you want,] Typhoon said. Talk about diplomatic.

For now, it seemed that the mods were on board, and that made Nopok feel better about taking a chance on the RP. He copied his description of Clair and pasted it into a reply.

[Here's my character,] he added. *[She's not what I expected her to be like, but I hope she fits.]*

Nopok waited for nearly an hour before the reply came from Typhoon. *[A rogue! She looks great. Glad to have you. If Luminous gets on, I think we can start right away.]*

[Okay,] Nopok posted. *[I'll be here for a while.]* He looked up around the lab, wondering what the other people would say if they saw their attendant spending all his time on gaming forums during his shift.

From his desk, Nopok could see every other screen in the lab. A few were occupied with essays, but most of them displayed non-schoolwork. There was a BBC homepage, several Instagram accounts, Google image searches, a movie streaming site, and an image-hosting website with ads plastering every corner of the layout.

These were young, modern users of the Internet, nothing like Nopok's parents. He liked to think no one would care—he knew that attitude better than anyone—but then again, you never knew when the wrong person was watching.

He turned his attention back to his own screen and began a Google Image search of fantasy rogues, then narrowed it to thief girls. Just as he disabled the safe search function, his phone vibrated. The message on it was from his father.

“Sorry, but work's bad. Call an Uber to get home.”

“I don't have the money,” Nopok replied.

“You get lunch with your work money. Get this too.”

Nopok went still for a moment, angry and embarrassed at himself. “Okay,” he finally replied. “Sorry I said anything.”

He disabled the vibrate on his phone, closed the browser tab of the role play topic, and began searching for a safe place to go after work.

* * *

The public library was close to Nopok's house, technically within walking distance. Half of his neighborhood was a historic district and lacked sidewalks, but it was safe place to walk, as long as you could avoid coyotes and trucks with the wrong political bumper stickers. Even if his dad could not pick him up, Nopok imagined that the walk home would be fine, maybe even enjoyable with so many fenced-off animal enclosures. One of the neighbors, if he remembered correctly, was raising donkeys. There had to be some upside to walking home, even if at the end of his journey he was returning to a house where everyone met him with hostility and bitterness.

As for the library itself, Nopok had not gone to it since fifth grade, and even then, he and his mother had just stopped by before going to the park, where they walked through gardens and fed ducks together. The library was the smallest branch in the county, with a few private rooms in the back that were used for government meetings and then a larger main room, which was arranged simply, with rows of reading tables in the middle surrounded by bookshelves, and a few odd tables nestled between shelves. According to the website, the library now emphasized "new media" literacy, advertising their modern computers and free Internet access.

Hopefully, a 21st century library would pay for a decent wi-fi plan. At the very least, though, Nopok could find a decent computer and sit there until the library closed. Without any friends to reach out to, it was the only real option he could think of, other than the old rec center he had visited several times in high school. And that place had been more middle ages than 21st century: the drainage pipes had broken down several times over the years, ruining the gym floor so badly that it had had potholes the last time he went to it.

Nopok tried to time out how long he would be at the library. Even taking into account the walk home, it would be about three hours. That was more than enough time for the RP, at least. If he could stomach it, maybe he could fit in writing assignments for his classes. There was no telling what kind of dinner he could expect—probably just a few leftovers in a plastic Tupperware container.

He wondered how, or if, he would talk to his mother. His father had suggested lies, something to placate her obvious anger at him, but another part of Nopok felt almost relieved. At least she was being honest with him. He wondered what had pushed her over the edge this time: his inability to contribute to the house expenses, his natural rapport with his dad, or maybe something that had happened during the pandemic, some off-hand comment that had triggered her natural animosity with the world around her.

Back then, his mother had been a doomsayer, talking about how they would all die almost every week. She had seen several therapists, but nothing had calmed her. Every day, there was a new rant about how the conservatives would kill them all, and how the left was doing nothing to help. She hated both political parties, though not equally, and had turned every conversation for more than a year about how America would be better off without any politicians. At one point, she had begun snapping her fingers at the family dinner every day. When asked about it, she called it her “Thanos snap,” referencing the character from the Avengers series of films.

“Let me try,” she would say. “If I could just make them all disappear, I would.”

During her Thanos snap days, Nopok had actually been able to speak to her candidly about things she had never opened up to him about. To his surprise, she had apparently read

comics for much of her life. Her favorite had been the Fantastic Four. When asked why, she had said, “If I could have any power, I would want to be invisible.”

She had asked Nopok what power he would want—certainly it was the nerdiest thing she had ever said—and he replied that he would want to fly. His comment had prompted a rare laugh from her, a genuine one, but it had led to a comment that got under his skin.

“That would be nice. It would save us from having to buy another car.”

At the height of the pandemic, the family’s budget had been tight, but not so tight that they had lost their house. No one in the immediate family had died, either. His mother’s side of the family were living in a rare country town mostly untouched by Covid until the end, and his father’s side of the family were in a city that kept to strict mask and vaccine mandates. His mother had convinced her entire family to vaccinate, which eventually saved their lives after Covid swept through their town. On his father’s side, two great uncles had died, and an aunt was developing cancer from tissue scarring in her lungs. Nopok had tried to get his father to talk about his sister and her situation, but they had apparently not been in touch for years.

No one spoke about extended family anymore at the dinner table, or anywhere else. After the height of the pandemic tensions, which had somehow helped Nopok get closer to his mother, a small sense of normality had begun to creep back into their lives. Nopok and his father had made small mistakes here and there—not wearing masking outside when their mother demanded it, for example, or going to inside restaurants before she was ready to go with them. Once, she had accused Nopok of trying to kill her. It had been an explosive outpouring of anger, and she had even apologized for it offhand a few days later. Nopok thought that they had both moved past that, but it was hard to say.

Their last true fight had happened a few weeks ago, and it had been over something as petty as taking out the trash. It was hard to imagine how that would provoke her.

It had to be her relationship with his father. Their marriage had been breaking down for a long time, and Covid had just accelerated things. At every argument, Nopok expected them to make the announcement. But things had happened differently. She had gone after Nopok first, at least openly, and more than likely, it was just a way of going after his father indirectly.

His father, if this morning's breakdown was any indication, was feeling the impact as intended. There was no telling how he would respond this time.

If nothing else, three hours at the library would be a welcome distraction from that tangle of misery at home.

After leaving the lab, Nopok waited for ten minutes next to the road by the university until his Uber driver showed up. The details of where to go were all worked out over the phone. As soon as he was inside, Nopok said as little as possible, and after a few aborted conversations on local sports and music, his driver got the hint and just drove. For the rest of the ride, Nopok stared at his phone, pretending to be too busy to notice anything else. Once again, he had failed to strike up a normal conversation. So much for the real world.

After a twenty-minute drive, the Uber driver dropped him off at the library. Nopok thanked the driver dryly, paid for the trip with a credit card (that he would need to check the balance of later), and then stepped outside.

He had not looked at the property around the library in years. The adjacent park seemed unchanged from what he remembered, although the ducks were gone.

Maybe it's the wrong season for them, Nopok thought, trying and failing to remember when the ducks came and went in the area. Nopok turned and entered the library, noting the

emptiness of the parking lot as a good sign. He didn't think anyone in the library would hassle him for going to a gaming site for hours on end, but he still felt nervous when people were watching.

Inside, the library attendant asked him for an ID and a library card. Nopok showed his State ID and responded that he did not have the card.

"We can make you one," the attendant offered.

Nopok accepted with a quick "yeah" and then turned away as the attendant worked.

Layout-wise, the library was nearly identical to what Nopok remembered. Several old racks of books carried DVDs now (who watched *those* anymore?), and the back rooms were now completely closed off to the public, but the rows of tables were still there, and the computer layouts on them looked decent enough. Even far away, Nopok could recognize the Dell logo on the side. Hopefully, they had adequate security precautions in place, like the computers at the lab.

Another nice detail: the library patrons wore masks, for the most part. Maybe news of this year's big new Covid variant had scared people back into the old pandemic routines. His mother, at least, liked to talk about how masks were here to stay. She had bought enough spares to fill a heavy cabinet in the dining room.

After some time, the attendant took a picture of Nopok and then printed his card. After being given a choice, Nopok decided to have it Xeroxed for a small fee.

The picture itself was so embarrassingly ugly that Nopok said, "I mess all my cards up," as the attendant put it through the machine. The attendant just smiled awkwardly. Nopok said nothing else until he was given his card. "Thanks," he added before walking off towards the rows of computers.

Most of the people using them were either teenagers or the elderly. He saw several movie streams from the older people. Some of the teenagers had come with headsets and game controllers. He saw *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, *Among Us*—all the usual suspects when it came to popular multiplayer games. Nopok felt a little old-fashioned, coming here to participate in a play-by-post RP on a message board, but he had not played shooters seriously since middle school. He had actually asked other college students if they had played the same games that loved, but he had never found anyone who did still play Japanese Role-Playing Games, or JRPGs.

They're probably there, he told himself. He just didn't know how to talk to people. More failure at real life.

After wandering around, Nopok found exactly what he had wanted: a computer station between shelves, with the screen facing the wall. There would be a window behind him, but the church near the library was so close that no one outside would be able to see him. He sat down at the desk, adjusted the chair, and logged onto the computer with his new library ID.

The desktop was basic, with equally basic security and browser choices, but Nopok only needed three hours. He could live with limited options.

Security-wise, though, he would probably want to start rotating passwords for his Gamefaqs account, just to be safe.

* * *

Luminous and Typhoon had already begun creating “story posts” by the time Nopok arrived at the forum. Reading them, he felt a little sad that he had not started it with them.

Typhoon opened the story with a monologue:

[Four years after the defeat of the Baron empire, the crystals, which serve as intermediaries between mortals and the living power of magic, stir from their long sleep. A new nation, stemming from the oppressed victims of the previous war, rises to bring order to the world, or so they claim. With the dawn of New Baron, many fear that the events of the past are doomed to repeat. With magic itself waning, a group of unlikely travelers encounter each other, unaware of the destiny awaiting them...]

Nopok couldn't help but grin as he read the premise. It was full of clichés, such as events from the past repeating and waning magic. Typhoon had promised familiar. This was definitely familiar.

Typhoon's next post introduced his own character, which he promised would be the first of many original NPCs in the RP.

[On the plains of Baron, west of the Red Falls, a young knight named Gideon makes his way towards the Cavern of Mist. Along the way, he hears of a vampire who has been terrifying nearby villagers. Gideon travels towards the vampire's mansion, located far to the south of the Mist Cavern.]

The next post came from Luminous, who followed with the introduction of his own character.

[Scott walks along the road to the vampire's mansion. A clanking echoes in the distance, and he turns to meet whoever is coming, keeping a hand on the hilt of his sword.]

"Who are you?" he says to the approaching traveler."]

Typhoon had replied only a minute after Luminous's post.

[Gideon sees the knight's sword and raises his hands, not wanting to provoke the man.]

"My name is Gideon. I am a knight of Baron. I heard that the vampire in this mansion has disturbed the people of Baron village, near the Chocobo forest to the south."]

[“That's what they say, Gideon,”] Luminous responded. [“What are you going to do if you find this vampire?”

Scott keeps his sword pointed at the knight from Baron.]

Nopok already liked Scott's dialogue.

According to the topic's log, which recorded when each post was written, Typhoon's reply took nearly ten minutes to write.

[“If I find this vampire,” Gideon says, staying still and calm, “I'm going to talk to him and ask about what he's doing to ‘disturb’ all these villagers. Maybe he had his reasons. If so, I want to hear them.”]

Nopok grinned, glad that Typhoon seemed genre-savvy.

[“Good answer,” Scott says. He lowers his sword and sheathes it,] Luminous replied. [Scott then walks up to Gideon and offers his hand. “My name's Scott. I'm a wandering soldier from Sarune. As I was passing through, those villagers of yours hired me to exterminate their vampire menace. I refused, and came here on my own to learn the truth. I'm glad to hear that so-called knights of Baron no longer fight first and ask questions later. Maybe the world has changed since the war.”]

[Gideon takes Scott's hand,]" Typhoon replied. ["Not as much as you think," Gideon says. "It takes a lot of work to save the world, especially from itself."]

["Oh?" Scott says. "Is that what you want to do? Save the world?"]

["If I can," Gideon says. "What about you, Scott? Why have you come so far from Sarune?"]

[Scott pauses, suddenly pensive. "I left because my home has lost its way, and only the world's greatest warrior can set it right. So, that's what I'm going to become."]

[Gideon whistles. "Good dream. And your first trial is this vampire situation, I take it?]

[Scott shakes his head. "No. My first trial is to travel the world, see for myself what strength and honor mean, and then decide what it takes for me to measure up to the best."]

[Gideon smiles and takes a step onto the road. "It doesn't sound like you've chosen an easy life for yourself, Scott. Why not make it easier? Travel with me for a while. The road's lonely by yourself, and if you're going to debate the meaning of honor, why not have someone to talk to? Besides, it looks like we're both going to same way."]

["It looks that way," Scott said. He adjusted the sword at his hilt and joined Gideon on the road. "What about you, Gideon? You look like the sort of man who follows a dream. What is it?"]

["Nothing as personal as honor and strength," Gideon says. "All I want to do is save the world."]

Nopok stopped reading and looked down at his keyboard. His hands were trembling with excitement, and his mind was racing to find the right words for his own introductory post.

The RP was good so far, far better than he had hoped it would be. Typhoon and Luminous's characters read like knights from an epic: cheesy and sentimental and as genuine as he had hoped. They set the perfect tone to play against his own character.

The next few posts described Gideon and Scott's journey to the vampire's mansion. Fancy setting descriptions established the Baron countryside as idyllic and flowery. *Just like the Memphis suburbs*, Nopok thought. Pretty, but hiding troubling attitudes and serious societal problems. Baron, in the game, had nearly taken over the world through violent conquest, and pretty much its entire government had been wiped out by an evil wizard. Memphis, for all its celebration of music and culture, seemed hopelessly beset by economic inequality. While the politicians were no evil wizards, political corruption ran deep, and it had only gotten worse since Covid.

Like the real world, this fantasy world felt like it was on the verge of falling apart.

Typhoon, in pointing out the *[hateful stares of passing farmers and the agony of indentured workers (and slaves) in the fields]*, seemed to be channeling the south. There was a possibility that it was just an accident, but Nopok suspected that Typhoon came from the south. However, he would never ask for another user's real-world location on the forum. Not only would it result in an instant ban from the site itself, but it was also a breach of the implicit agreement between users here not to bring real world grief into a forum dedicated to games.

The final post in the RP thread featured Typhoon explaining how Gideon and Scott arrived at the vampire's mansion. Typhoon's description of the house seemed so detailed that Nopok was sure he had copied it from somewhere.

[The vampire's home is a huge, rectangular house with faded drywall and elements of Greek design. Columns held up balconies, the sides of which were embellished with carved

miniatures acting out scenes of war and conquest. It was in all senses the template for Baronian mansions, except for the sense that more than time and the elements had contributed to its downfall. The house seemed cursed, as much by magic as by the vices of Baron's need for conquest."]

It was more than just a difficult post to follow up on. The more that Nopok read the description, the more he was mesmerized by the level of detail in it, if not outright afraid of Typhoon's writing quality.

He suddenly thought about his rustiness at writing and worried that he would not measure up to Typhoon.

He pulled up a reply page and stared at the blank side window. He typed "Clair" just to erase the transparent "reply" prompt at the top left of the window, and then stared at her name.

Clair, the serious-minded, tricky assassin with a checkered past and nothing left to lose, suddenly felt like a difficult character to play, despite Nopok knowing all the clichés. Before reading Typhoon and Luminous's posts, he had thought clichés would have been enough. Now he felt that they deserved more, but it also felt like it was an impossible task to match their skill.

Nopok had been wanting this so badly, though. He couldn't just walk away. This was finally his chance to be seen, to be recognized—to be something truer to himself than the life he returned to at the dinner table.

Before he started writing, Nopok decided to just put his feelings into his post directly, even if they didn't quite fit his initial idea for Clair. Maybe they wouldn't be right for her, but they felt right for him.

[Clair follows the knights to the mansion and then hides in the nearby bushes. Her training has taught her to be stealthy: too stealthy. For much of her life, she has stayed unseen,

and has only thought of the missions given to her by her master. Now, Clair was on her own. Last night, her master had kicked her out of the monastery, leaving Clair with little idea of how to continue on with her life. She has followed the knights, thinking at first that she would rob them, but then she listened to them from the shadows. Scott and Gideon were not what she expected. Intrigued, she continues to watch them, wondering if their actions match their words. Can she trust these two knights and reveal herself? She follows, hiding her movements and sounds, hand at her dagger, hoping she would not need to use it, but ready just in case.]

It took Nopok nearly twenty minutes to finish writing the introduction. He agonized over every word. By the end of it, he realized that he had not left any room for dialogue. He had not even had Clair reveal herself to the others.

How could they even know how to react? Did he want them to react? Maybe he was still scared to be seen, he thought, and he had projected that feeling onto Clair.

He posted the reply, and then leaned back in his seat and breathed. For the rest of his time in the library, he waited for someone to reply. Luminous posted one short message saying that he would be able to write another reply tomorrow. Typhoon came in later, saying that he too needed time to write more, and that life commitments had come up.

Even though he had almost two hours to fill, Nopok was too excited to write anything for homework assignments. Eventually, a group of employees began walking up to people at their desks and telling them that the library was closing. For a moment, Nopok was worried that his post would not even be seen before he would be forced to leave.

He scanned the webpage. A notification at the top of the site alerted Nopok to a personal message he had received. It was from Typhoon, and it was titled simply “Hey.”

[Let's use PMs to talk about posts. I liked your first post and I'm excited about seeing where Clair goes from here. When do you think you can post next?]

After a moment, Nopok replied, *[I'll be on tomorrow after work starts. 1:30 pm.]*.

[Cool,] Typhoon finally replied. *[See you then. We'll probably move into the mansion. I'll assume Clair is following.]*

[Great,] Nopok said, just as an employee stopped by his station to ask him to shut down his computer.

By the time he went outside, it was 9:05 pm. Almost all of the cars in the parking lot were gone, and the night buzzed with the sound of restless cicadas and traffic. A single text message from his father read "Coming home?" A voicemail notification indicated a missed call.

A single yellow streetlamp lighted the way between the library parking lot and the railroad tracks crossing the road Nopok would take to go home. Nopok stuffed his phone into his pocket and followed the road, stopping along the way to watch a pair of donkeys that paced the fence of their pasture under the moonlight.

* * *

Nopok slammed the door hard behind him, unintentionally making his presence known to everyone in the house.

“Who is it?” his mother shouted from her bedroom. Sammy, who was sitting at the dining table alone, answered her.

“It’s just Jeff.”

“Okay,” Nopok’s mother answered.

Sammy watched as Nopok walked through the entrance hall and began passing the dining room.

“Where’d you go?” Sammy finally said. Nopok turned and studied his brother’s expression, but he could not read it.

“The library,” Nopok said, trying to sound neutral.

“Did you have a good time?” Sammy said. He sounded genuinely curious, which was surprising.

“Yeah, it was okay,” Nopok said. “Nice and quiet.”

Sammy nodded. “Yeah.” Something about his tone was off.

“What about you?” Nopok asked. “You doing okay?”

Sammy took in a deep breath. “I don’t know. Just chilling, I guess.”

“Did dad come home?” Nopok asked, already knowing the answer. His father’s car was absent from the driveway.

“No, he’s still out,” Sammy said, without a hint of the bite or teasing Nopok usually expected, at least when both of their parents were home. “Mom’s pretty upset about it.”

“Yeah,” Nopok said. “I know.”

“She wanted to talk to you when you got home,” Sammy said. He pointed towards the den. “She’s in her room.”

“Okay...” Nopok said, not bothering to hide his suspicion. He paused for a moment, but Sammy just stared at the end of the room, apparently looking at a set of old porcelain figures their mother had bought early in her marriage. They depicted three scenes from the Bible: the wise men visiting the infant Christ, Elijah’s chariot of flames, and the young King David wielding his sling. Each figure was coated in dust. No one had touched them in years.

Nopok’s mother had stopped going to church in the beginning of the pandemic and had not been back to it since. When anyone asked her about it, she would either change the subject or remind everyone that people were still dying from Covid. “Why would God ask us to die just to eat bread and water?” she had said. Nopok had not tried to argue with her, and his father had not pressed the issue further.

After putting away his school things, Nopok crept to his mother’s room and knocked at the door.

“Come in,” his mother replied after a moment. Nopok edged the door open slowly and stood in the doorway. She was sitting at her writing desk, a heavy oak piece that she claimed had once belonged to a Shelby County sheriff. A plate of food sat on one of the top drawers.

“Hey,” he said, not sure what was even appropriate anymore.

“Do you know where your father is?” his mother asked. Her stare was bitter, but her eyes lacked the anger of the previous night.

Nopok shook his head. “No.”

His mother let out a long sigh. “He told me he was going to pick you up.”

“He told *me* he was busy. I had to take an Uber.”

There was a long pause. “Where did you go?” she finally asked. “Did you stay at the school?”

“No, I went to the library.” Nopok waited to see if she wanted more detail.

“That’s good,” she finally said. She put a hand on her desk, and then took it off, like she wasn’t sure how to look. “Well,” she added after a moment, “let me know if he shows up, okay?”

Nopok froze. There was a sadness in her voice that he had not expected.

“Sure,” he said. He started to back away. “Do you want me to close the door?”

“Yes please,” she said.

After leaving, Nopok returned to the dining room. Sammy’s eyes were on him the second he reappeared.

“It’s bad this time,” Sammy said. His wide eyes seemed to show fear.

Nopok wasn’t sure what to say, or if there was even anything appropriate to say to that. After a moment, he simply told Sammy that things would be “okay” and then went to his room. Hours later, he heard the front door slam open, and then the usual shouting. He reacted with his own typical habit, popping in ear buds and hoping a two-hour jazz compilation could knock him out.

That night, he slept two hours total. In the morning, his father was nowhere to be seen. His mother said nothing, and Sammy drove him to the university, murmuring the entire way about how this time, things were truly fucked, and nothing could ever make things go back to normal.

Nopok, of course, agreed with his brother, but did not ask for the details that Sammy had undoubtedly seen.

* * *

Thursday classes, in Nopok's mind, tended to represent the most surreal experiences of his time at the university. Today, his music appreciation class consisted of the teacher, Professor Carla Gusu, a Romanian teaching assistant, sharing impressionism with a class of southern students unaccustomed to anything outside of alt rock, country music, and Memphis sounds. Nopok, of course, appreciated learning new things, and he hoped that other students felt the same way, but the class was always quieter than the teacher clearly wanted it to be.

"They did not create the expected," she said of the composers, whom she clearly admired. "The songs did not hold to a key. They are atonal. Listen."

She proceeded to play a one-minute selection from Debussy's *Images*. When asked what they heard in the piece, one student replied, "Sounds like a Pixar movie." The class laughed, and the professor moved on with the lesson without responding seriously.

After class, Nopok tried to reassure Professor Gusu that he had liked the composition. "It's very sad," he said. "I don't think I've ever heard anything like it."

"Did it evoke an image for you?" she asked.

He thought on it for a moment, remembered the background art from the video, and said, "Maybe a fish swimming in a river?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. "Listen to the piece again and follow the fish through the water. Picture the current in your mind, and you will see what the composer wanted to achieve."

"I will," Nopok said. He walked away, wondering what else he could have done to impress the professor.

His next class, the last of the day, was Biology 101, taught by a researcher who had moved to Memphis to study marine life in the Mississippi River. The course had seemed simple enough for the first few weeks, when the focus was on non-controversial subjects such as the scientific method, reading charts and graphs, and inorganic chemistry. However, at the end of the previous class's lecture on the basics of organic molecules, the teacher, Professor Rob Raddatz, had pulled up the syllabus and referenced an odd warning that he had vaguely alluded to on the first day of the class.

“All right,” he said, “no more putting it off.” He paused for a moment, restless at his podium. Nopok wished he had been seated closer to the front. The mandatory seating arrangements placed him on row J, directly behind a line of students in expensive-looking sports jackets and sneakers, none of whom wore masks. To even see the Powerpoint presentation, Nopok needed to lean slightly left, almost getting too close to a student in battered brown khaki pants. Even once he adjusted, he could barely see the professor pull up the syllabus and highlight the warning in the middle of the document.

“This is when we get down to business,” Professor Raddatz said. “If you're going to study living things, it's my job to teach you biological evolution.” He raised his hand, as if expecting an immediate response from his crowd of almost ninety students. No one reacted, save for a snickering from the back rows. “I know there are ‘disagreements’ with this theory. I've heard them all before, so let's save ourselves some time and get to the point. If you don't believe in evolution, you can leave the hall now and not worry about losing credit. The state requires a waiver on this material in tests. Simply send an email and tell me your objections. Be specific: I want to know why you object. I won't harass you about it; I just need written communication to document your objection. That's all. You can write me a note or send me an email—I prefer

email, by the way. And again, you won't have to answer the evolution questions on the test. If you want a debate, sign up for a different class. We have a political science department for a reason. This is all I'll say about it. If you object, leave the room now and don't come in on Tuesday. We'll be covering it for two days."

He stopped. A handful of students rose and exited the room. An initial silence quickly gave way to a flurry of conversations. Nopok could hear nearby discussions—mostly chatter about the objectors. The sports jacket row ahead of him cursed them out for denying science. Not the reaction Nopok had expected from people who never wore masks to class.

Nopok opened his book and pretended to read the section on evolution, hoping that he looked too busy to be worth talk to.

"Last chance," Professor Raddatz said. "If you don't want to hear about evolution, leave now and let me know why later."

Another few students left the cramped auditorium classroom. After a pause, Professor Raddatz closed the syllabus and sighed before beginning the lecture. Only around ten students had left, but the exodus seemed to have taken the energy out of the professor. His energy peaked early when discussing how he can't even imagine studying biology without biological evolution, which he considered its cornerstone. "The alternatives aren't scientific: you have Neo Darwinism and Creationism. Neither are taken seriously in academic circles."

Nopok jotted down his notes dutifully and left the classroom feeling that he had seen a spectacle that reminded him of debates on the *Final Fantasy* forums. The professor, like online moderators, had drawn a line in the sand and addressed the debate before it happened, forcing one group to leave the room. To Nopok, this did not seem too different from banning disruptive members of the forum who disagreed with the forum rules. He had always straddled the line,

wanting to be social despite the forum's insistence on information and gameplay advice. Nopok had wondered what it was like to be on the other side, to be a moderator exerting a vision upon the people who came to the forum. He imagined that it felt similar to what Professor Raddatz had gone through kicking those objectors out of his classroom—in a word, powerful; something Nopok had rarely, if ever, felt in his life.

* * *

Nopok opened the lab without speaking to anyone and checked the forum as quickly as his computer could open his web browser. The daily Evo97 topic concerned a fan theory they had been trying to spread since the early days of the forum. [*So, Kain and Barbariccia's dialogue totally suggests a romantic fling. My question is, who started it?*]

No one had replied since they had posted it in the morning. Nopok wondered if other members of the forum had started to grow tired of Evo's discussions of fan theories. The first thing he did on the forum was to type a safe response to Evo's topic. [*Barbariccia initiated it, and you can tell that Kain was cold on the romance from the beginning.*]

Within minutes, Gizmos left a quick response. [*Kain and the party kills her. You can't be colder than that.*]

Nopok agreed, but was a little irritated. He had been following forum activity for a long time, and had noticed that most of the time Gizmos only replied with witty comebacks. He was reactionary in a way that pissed Nopok off, and Gizmos never started his own topics. Typhoon had been perhaps a bit too generous in letting Gizmos join the RP topic. Nopok wasn't sure if he would have okayed it. He could only imagine what kind of character Gizmos would choose once his chance came around to role play.

Sure enough, Nopok quickly discovered just that soon after reading through the new posts in the RP topic.

[*I want to make a character,*] Gizmos had said suddenly between story posts describing Scott and Gideon approaching the vampire's mansion. [*If you're okay with that, let me know and I'll post the character sheet.*]

Typhoon's reply was a decisive [*Sure, let's figure it out today. PM me.*]

Gizmos was online. Nopok knew that he could expect the character sheet to come at any moment. If he was lucky, Gizmos would wait until the late afternoon to post whatever character he had in mind. Nopok was afraid that the moderator would take the same sarcastic approach to RPing that he used in the rest of his posts.

Trying to block out his worry, Nopok read Typhoon's expository post. From the looks of it, Scott and Gideon were just entering the building and taking in the ambience.

[*Gideon and Scott enter through a massive front door and find demonic statues staring them down in a dusty, dilapidated entry hall. They pass an abandoned desk used for checking in guests. Ledgers detailing the names of visitors and date of visitation indicate that no one has physically frequented this manor in months. Beyond the entry hall, Gideon and Scott find a massive hall with two spiral staircases leading up to a dimly lit second floor with two doors to what might be bedrooms. Beneath the staircases is a door to a basement, a door to the right is cracked open, revealing the way to a kitchen, and the door to the left is boarded up. An eerie atmosphere pervades this grand hall. Gideon and Scott can hear wood creaking all around them. The smell of rotting flesh wafts in from a direction they cannot guess, as a fell wind seems to blow through the house like breathing. "You think someone left a window open?" Gideon asks Scott as they enter the hall.*]

Luminous's last post detailed Scott's response. [*"Maybe," Scott says, "or maybe a certain vampire left traps waiting for any would-be heroes stumbling into his home. We should*

be cautious.” Scott takes a step forward, glancing back just once to see if anyone had followed them into the manor.]

Nopok could tell that Luminous was opening the door for Clair to follow. Part of him was nervous to even get the opportunity. Would it be like him, or like Clair, to come out after being invited to join? He felt a little strange about it. Before even thinking about posting, he checked his personal messages. There was one from both Luminous and Typhoon. Nopok had expected the message from Typhoon—after all, they still needed to figure out how Clair would step in and talk to Scott and Gideon. However, Luminous reaching out to him was a surprise.

He hovered his cursor over Typhoon’s message, thinking at first that he could plan things with Typhoon first before seeing what Luminous wanted, but the more he thought about it, the more curious he became. Why would someone like Luminous, a veteran of multiple *Final Fantasy* boards, reach out to him?

Nopok clicked on Luminous’s message and saw that it was short. He began to read it, almost afraid of what he would find.

[Hey, just wanted to say I’m excited to role play with you. Feel free to have Clair come up and talk to Scott anytime.] He ended the message with a smile emoji. Nopok’s heart dropped.

Luminous’s tone was so conversational, and he had messaged Nopok just to express how excited he was to play. Nopok couldn’t remember the last time anyone had been so happy to be doing anything with him. Even his family seemed to regard him with grudging tolerance. He read Luminous’s words over and over again, trying to imagine the person on the other side. Habitually, he thought of Camarilla’s paladin, Luminous’s character, an icon of unrealistic handsomeness and purity. It was so easy to project those qualities onto Luminous. Nopok almost wanted to hug his monitor, just to feel closer to the user.

After cooling down, Nopok wondered how he would respond to Luminous. What would he do with Clair? He almost wanted to just have her reveal herself now. Maybe Luminous would be on in the next few hours to reply, and they could interact directly, posting back and forth. The idea of it excited Nopok to no end. However, he knew that Typhoon was the RP's runner. The plot was his, and Nopok wanted to be careful not to overstep his bounds as a player.

Nopok began typing his reply to Luminous in a Notepad document. In the first part of it, he tried his best to sound casual. [*Thanks. I'm excited to role play with you too. I'm a little nervous, since this is my first time, but I think it'll be a lot of fun.*] Talking about what to do with Clair, however, was trickier. After a moment, he decided to put it off until after he had talked to Typhoon, though he still wanted to message Luminous, just in case he was on and could still respond faster than the RP runner. So, Nopok simply added [*As for Clair's intro, I'm still talking to Typhoon about it. I'll let you know what we come up with.*] He then checked the message for typos and sent it. He felt tense for minutes after it sent, reloading the page several times to check for immediate replies. After some time passed with no changes in the inbox, he opened Typhoon's message.

[*Hey, Gizmos PMed me about his character. He'll be introduced soon, maybe in two or three posts. Feel free to keep Clair in hiding if you want, but if she comes out, she can join Scott and Gideon in meeting the vampire. Post as early as you can so Gizmos can have some setup. I'll be on around four to advance us to the vampire's room. Do what you can before then. Thanks, - Typhoon.*]

Nopok paused, thinking over his options. If he brought out Clair now, maybe he could catch Luminous before Typhoon advanced the story. There were still three hours to 4 pm, and judging by how often Luminous had posted when he had Typhoon had been on, Nopok could

potentially do a lot of role playing. The thought of interacting as Clair with Luminous made him nervous, but Nopok knew that it would come sooner or later. He had committed to this, and was looking forward to it so much that it made him tense, afraid he would mess it up somehow.

Gizmos, though, had changed the flow of the game. If Nopok brought Clair out now, there was the chance that he would have to interact with Gizmos's character, whoever that turned out to be. If Luminous did not get on, then it would just be Nopok and Typhoon role playing with the moderator. Nopok wasn't sure how comfortable he was doing anything with Gizmos. The idea of having him in the RP was nerve-wracking. What if something made Gizmos angry? Would he turn on the topic and recommend action against it to the other mods? Or would he take the topic down himself? By inviting the moderator, it seemed like Typhoon was playing with fire. Nopok just hoped that things worked out.

After thinking everything over, Nopok felt nervous, too nervous to think about bringing Clair out now. He instead worked on a post keeping her out of sight. It was the safe way of continuing, but hopefully it would still be enough to advance the plot from Typhoon's end.

[Clair follows the two knights into the dusty manor, staying careful not to make too much noise as she steps lightly over the creaky floorboards. This is not the first time she has infiltrated an old mansion; her master had sent her to steal from the wealthy owners of many similar buildings, but this is the first time she has entered one without a plan. She is still curious about the two knights: Gideon, who wants to save the world, and Scott, who seems more intent on saving himself. Clair continues, wondering if she is even worth saving after everything she has done in service of the wicked. If she could take back everything she had ever stolen, would even this mansion be enough to hold it all? She stays tense as the knights advance into the main room, keeping a hand on her dagger and sticking to the shadows like a ghost. She sees Scott's eyes

wander. Does he suspect that someone is following him? Are his instincts that good? Clair tells herself to be especially careful around Scott. Even if she wanted to be seen by him, and for some reason reveal herself to him, what would she even say? Just the thought of speaking to a man like that felt overwhelming. Was she even worthy of his attention?]

Writing the post took almost thirty minutes, and it went on much longer than Nopok expected. As he read through it, he worried that it felt too wordy, or that he was somehow giving too many of her thoughts away. He wondered about adding more gestures too, but figured that there was not much more he could add without making her more active, and that did not fit her stealthy approach to following Scott and Gideon. He also worried that she would seem too flakey or nervous at the idea of talking to Scott. What if Luminous felt that her feelings weren't motivated? Then again, Nopok had written those thoughts hoping to give Luminous something to work with, just in case Scott decided to check for followers more intently. Nopok was still not sure how player interactions were supposed to work in this kind of written RP. How quickly were they supposed to move, who was supposed to initiate contact, and were there rules for how player-to-player interactions worked? He decided to ask Typhoon for some advice later.

After posting, Nopok read over his words over and over again until he was satisfied that they would work, at least for now. He could always add more later or clarify why Clair felt the way she did. This was an RP, not a novel: one's words were always in flux. Posts could be edited if they needed to be edited, details could be added, characters and events could even be retconned if needed. He just hoped Gizmos's introduction was as smooth as possible, and that he would not be the one who had to handle it.

After a thirty-minute wait, he saw a new post on the RP topic, scrolled down to the last page, and read it.

[The vampire, whose name is Void, silently stalks the intruders entering his home, using his powers to glide through the darkness. Like a cold wind, he bears down on the rogue following the two knights, creeping up on her without being seen, and then he makes his move. With a rush, he pins her against the wall, fangs drawn out, and says “Hello there!”].

Nopok sucked in a deep breath, and then barely resisted the urge to throw his—or rather, the department’s—keyboard against the wall and scream.

* * *

[*Please don't power play*] was Typhoon's official response to Gizmos's post. Cutting into the topic, the comment felt usually terse, considering what had happened. Typhoon also sent a personal message to Nopok asking him to be patient. [*I'm PMing Gizmos right now. He probably just doesn't know the etiquette for doing this.*]

Nopok, admittedly, was not sure he understood it either. He Googled the term power play, refining the search several times until he arrived at the Urban Dictionary's definition, which described a player controlling someone else's character in a role play situation.

As if that was the worst part of the post! Nopok couldn't help but see it for the aggression it was. He was a moderator shoving his way into the story and using Clair as a springboard to look edgy. The character's name, Void, was obviously an attempt to look cool.

Nopok did not need to wait for Typhoon to get back to him. In real life, Nopok had always crumpled before any kind of aggression: his parents walked all over him without much resistance, and he had accepted the good intentions of educators and church members all his life without ever objecting, even when he wanted to. When he was online, however, Nopok did not need to worry about the face staring back at him. Gizmos's history of one-line comebacks, as well as his avatar, a mockup of Peter Griffin from Family Guy wearing a character's bandana from another *Final Fantasy* game, told Nopok everything he needed to know about the mod: that Gizmos was one of countless users out for the "lolz," just like any other troll. Then only difference was that Gizmos has official status, that title of moderator backing him up. Ordinarily,

that authority would scare Nopok out of retaliating in any meaningful way, but this time, things were different—it was *his* character on the receiving end of the mod's trolling.

Nopok was not about to let Clair go down without a fight.

[As Clair creeps through the mansion, following Scott and Gideon, she feels a cold wind at the last minute—or, rather, a cold presence, as it descends on her like a fell wind. At the last minute, she whips a silver dagger out of its sheathe, positioning the pointy end directly against her assailant's stomach. "Hello yourself," she says, struggling to hide her surprise at her assailant's supernatural power." She could smell the stink of undeath on him. Was this the owner of this foul, dilapidated mansion? If so, she could already tell how this might go: no one, living or otherwise, liked intruders in their precious homes.]

Nopok tapped hard on the final period and let out a relieved sigh as the post went live. His writing had felt like a retaliatory blow, and it felt good to not rely on someone else, even a role player as impressive as Typhoon. Nopok had fought his own battle, or at least launched the first counterattack against an aggressor. He thought about telling his father before remembering that his father had not returned home in the morning. A sick feeling began to eat away at his sense of success, but he pushed it back down as a person in the lab asked him to change the paper in the printer.

Sometimes, a dull, repetitive task had its benefits. When he returned to his computer, he saw that a new post had already been thrown down in the RP topic. Opening the page, he saw that it was from Gizmos.

[Void grabs the rogue's hands and flies upward, lifting her up into the second floor by her wrists, preventing her from twisting her silver dagger any further closer to his chest. He floats until they are both poised against the dusty roof over the second story balcony. Confident

that he has the advantage, Void asks, “Who sent you? Was it the Baron nobility? Did they tell you to kill me? Was I too inconvenient for their little land-grabbing scheme?”]

After reading the post, Nopok knew that he was supposed to get angry at how Void had basically ignored Clair’s threat and lifted her up. Realistically, maybe, she would have had the opportunity to gut him as he tried to lift her at all. Nopok felt a rush of adrenaline shoot through him, but the effect was not what he had expected. He wanted to keep playing, to respond to this obvious aggression against his character. Letting Typhoon handle this was probably the smart thing to do, but Nopok was hungry to role play. The opposition from Gizmos had sparked something in him and he wanted to follow it through to the end.

A red icon on the top of his screen alerted him to a new personal message. Typhoon had sent him another message. *[Hey, you don’t have to go along with Gizmos right now if you don’t want to. I’m talking to him about boundaries, and I can ask him to edit his posts if you feel like he went too far.]*

[I’m okay,] Nopok typed in response. *[Let’s see where this goes.]*

With that, he went back into the topic and typed a new response.

[Clair tucks her legs in and let the vampire float her up nearly to the ceiling. His questions reveal a weakness she did not expect: a fear that someone had sent her to kill him. She lets him lift her up, and after he says his piece, she replies, “Who do you think sent me?” Before the vampire can reply, Clair kicks hard against his chest, loosening his grip, and falls to the second story below, rolling to redistribute the impact of her landing. Shaken only for a moment by the jolt of hitting the dusty wooden floor, she leaps back onto her feet and readies a throwing dagger, ready to defend herself but curious concerning his reasons for sneaking up on her.”]

Nopok's heart beat quickly as he tapped on the reply button. As fast as Gizmos was replying, he expected another post soon. It was still only 3:55, just an hour and five until the lab closed. Surely, he and the moderator could keep the interaction going until then.

After almost ten minutes, another personal message came in from Typhoon. *[I've got an idea and I'm talking to Gizmos about it. Keep going once he posts. I'm loving your fight.]*

As tense as Nopok was at first, he had to admit that he was enjoying it as well.

Gizmos's next post dropped at 4:25, which Nopok knew would give him time to reply at least one more time before the lab's closing hours.

[Void floats over the rogue, impressed by her ability to escape him, and pulls out a rapier with wicked black flames imprinted onto the blade. He levitates step by step until he faces off with her on the second story. "I assume, girl, that General Donnel of Baron sent you here to kill me. What better way to eliminate the only one who knows your plans?"]

Nopok could already see the change in the way Gizmos had set up his post. For one thing, he had stopped with the power playing by not forcing Clair to do anything in his own post. He had also included details that had probably come from Typhoon. Nopok knew that he was being asked to take the bait. He checked his personal message inbox and was surprised not to find anything from Typhoon. He had not known what to expect from the RP runner. Just from the fact that he was sending PMs at all, Nopok had wondered if Typhoon had intended to direct everyone post by post. Nopok could understand the reasons for doing that, but it definitely did not sound fun. He was more interested in an RP where he could contribute to the story, controlling his character's fate and actions himself. Anything less than that, and he would just be surrendering Clair to the chains of someone else's plot.

Hopefully, Typhoon would not end up doing that.

Nopok checked the time—it was 4:40—and decided that he had enough time for one final post. He had to make it count. No matter what he thought of Gizmos outside of the RP topic, the snarky moderator seemed like a different person when he was role playing. Nopok smiled as he imagined a dashing, but too full of himself vampire living alone in a mansion for years, obviously hungry to feed his ego, maybe even desperate for a gratification, but too awkward to interact with normal society. Then, Nopok thought of Clair. Was she really any different?

[Clair lowers her throwing dagger, sensing something from the vampire: not hostility, but due caution, exactly the kind that she would apply to this same situation if their positions were reversed. She holds up her hands in a gesture of peace and says, “I wasn’t sent by General Donnell. No one sent me. I came on my own after hearing the complaints of the villagers. I wanted to meet the feared vampire of Baron and see for myself what kind of person he was.”]

Nopok stopped. The post was shorter than he had expected it to be, and it had only taken him ten minutes to finish it. He looked around and saw that several people were getting off of their computers and leaving the lab. Others would need to be told that the lab was closing. Nopok decided to give himself five more minutes, and then spent it rereading his post, wondering if he had done the right thing with it. Just five minutes later, Gizmos’s reply came up, and it was short.

[Void pauses, studying the rogue before him, but then decides to lower his own weapon as well. Staying only somewhat on guard, he smiles and says, “I hope you like what you see, miss assassin. They call me Void, but you may call me V. It is the first syllable my real name, and all that remains of my identity before I came what you see before you.”]

Nopok couldn’t believe that Gizmos had managed to post so quickly, but then again, after a few posts, Nopok had noticed that it felt easier to write somehow. The rhythm and flow of the

story had started to make sense to him. He had a feeling that if they continued, posts would get even shorter, maybe even just quick reactions and dialogue.

Before closing the computer lab, Nopok checked his personal messages inbox and saw one PM, this time from Gizmos.

[I'm having lots of fun! Let's keep going!] A smiley emoji punctuated his final sentence.

Reading the message, Nopok felt a rush of pride and smiled. Even with mere minutes until closing time and with people still reading emails, watching videos, and God knows what else, Nopok stopped to reply to Gizmos.

[I've got to move locations. Give me thirty minutes and I'll be back on.]

The reply—just a blushing emoji—came in less than a minute. Nopok carried it with him in his mind out the doors of the building.

* * *

Nopok's phone was inundated with text messages from his father, and only when he saw them did he realize that he had forgotten to even try to contact his dad today. The messages depicted a range of reactions, beginning with routine questioning, "What time are you getting out?" before becoming more heated, "Where are you? What's going on?" until finally slipping into an aggressive tone, "Call me right NOW!"

Nopok knew that if he waited, the messages would get even worse, so he texted back, "I'm just getting out of work." His phone rang seconds after the message sent. His father's voice was scratchy, almost, a quality that Nopok was not familiar with.

"I'm on Central," his father said. He took a long breath, and Nopok cut in before he could say more.

"I'll be there soon."

"I want to explain what's happening," his father said. There was a pause. "I'll see you soon," he added before hanging up without a goodbye.

Nopok felt a sudden rush of fear. What, exactly, was there to explain? The previous night, he had assumed that his dad had just driven around all night—he had done it often enough before when he and Nopok's mother were fighting seriously. If he was not there in the morning, chances were that he had stayed at some cheap motel in the city, probably after getting trashed on Beale Street. Nopok had used to wonder if his father met other women while he was away. His mother certainly threw out the accusation often enough. However, Nopok had never seen any real evidence of it, and his father always denied it to him. Eventually, Nopok had just decided to

trust what his father told him, even if that trust was forced. He had lived in continual distrust of his parents for most of his life, second-guessing everything they said, from life advice to backseat driving to even casual statements that they loved him. Once he was out of high school, Nopok had decided that enough was enough. His parents' relationship was looking worse than ever, and he was sick of the drag it was becoming on his life. The constant worry ruined his ability to think, and the uncertainty that their arguments caused the household ate away at his self confidence. He needed simplicity, and the best way to achieve that was to play dumb, to give in to them whenever he could, to pretend that he did not notice the fighting, and to smile and nod when they told him things that would otherwise make him furious. Living with a mask on, he thought, was a small price to pay for focus, which he would need to survive in college.

He had not expected things to get worse after he decided to be more deliberate in masking his feelings. His mother saw right through him, and she had started probing every word for some hidden meaning. The upside was that she was paying more attention to him. It was certainly a change from the mother who never noticed him, but under her scrutinizing gaze, he found it impossible to keep up his act for long, and, as a result, their conversations always seemed to end in mutual disappointment. So, more often than not, they both tried to keep their interactions short. Maybe her decision to kick him out of the house was an effort to end the stress they both felt from just being around each other. Keeping him out of the house was definitely one way to make things simple.

Nopok's father had been easier to deal with, at least at first. Nopok's routine of nodding and being silent worked during most of their conversations. His father liked to do the talking, and he pushed through another person's comments like a steamroller, outright ignoring criticism and certainly never allowing more than a sentence or two to block out his own stream of

consciousness points. As annoying as his nonstop talking could be, Nopok's father was articulate, at least when he was sober. Alcohol brought out another side, a conversationalist who could pick someone apart with just as much spite and bitterness as his wife could. For the last few months, Nopok's father had reserved that side of himself for his mother, especially when the topic of Covid came up. His father had insisted on trying to find a new normal, to gradually regaining the ground they had lost to pandemic mandates. Sometimes, he went too far attacking what he called Covid "paranoia," and that had just increased the strain on his marriage.

No matter what faults his father had, though, Nopok could at least say that the man rarely took out his issues on his children. If nothing else, Nopok's father had inspired him not to air his own grievances out to other people. A real man, apparently, carried his demons silently and fought them in his most private moments.

After meeting his father at the car, Nopok could tell that he had been battling his demons all night. His coat had several new stains and his hair was disheveled, probably from a night of tossing and turning. Nopok's father often complained about the beds in cheap motels. "They just never get the firmness right. It's always too soft or too hard."

Nopok had always wanted to ask him why he put himself through so much heartache if it made him so uncomfortable. Wasn't it easier just to pretend that everything was fine and live comfortably? If you needed more from your life, you could always just look elsewhere, like Nopok did. Sometimes, there was no way your immediate circumstances could satisfy your desires. Nopok, of course, valued his online life more than his home life. He wondered what his family would say if he told them. Did they have secret lives that they were hiding away, like he was? Despite living together, they were all so distant now, aside from the occasional emotional breakdowns they shared.

In any case, his father did not look to be in any mood to listen to anyone today. As soon as Nopok was in the car, his father bolted onto the road and did all of the talking.

“I know I didn’t come home yesterday. I’m sorry about that. I know you guys are sick of my crap.”

His father’s tone conveyed anger, not at Nopok, but at himself. Nopok just nodded and said, “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. I’ve not been there for you guys and I’m going to have to find a way to make it up to you.”

Nopok sighed, but hid it as a yawn, turning his head to make it look real. He could already recognize the type of speech this was going to be, and he knew his part in it: one half silent observer, the other half a cheerleader. His father would continue talking about how he was going to get his life together and make things up to everyone. Vague plans, such as fixing up the yard, starting a garden, and selling the house and moving west featured heavily, and he would go on until they both agreed that the plans sounded good. Those speeches had made more sense in a pre-pandemic world, when moving had seemed financially possible. Now, whenever he started his speeches, they felt hopelessly outdated, as if he were trying to fight a wildfire by watering a single tree.

Still, Nopok let his father air out apologies. There was no point in fighting, and the experience always seemed to make his father feel better. In the past, there had been other benefits: his father would drive them out to a Wal-Mart and buy Nopok something as an apology, usually a video game. Most of Nopok’s collection of Playstation 4 discs had come from these “makeup” trips. However, any hope of continuing these trips had stopped after the pandemic. No one in the family had the extra income anymore, especially with Nopok’s tuition going up—not

down—during the Covid year. There were also various car payments, as well as the mortgage and a million other tiny payments that no one noticed until the end of the month.

Sammy, unlike Nopok, had worked to make things easier, keeping his part-time job even as the pandemic raged. Their mother had begged Sammy to stop, but Sammy had played up his status as an essential worker at the grocery store. Somehow, Nopok’s brother had managed to navigate that conflict with their mother without alienating her, even at her most extreme hatred of people who refused to take Covid seriously.

All Nopok really had to show his “commitment” to improving the family’s situation was the Tennessee lottery scholarship, a \$1000 payment every semester. This, at least, kept him from looking like a complete failure, but he still felt that the family blamed him for their difficulties. To his parents, he was a burden, or at best a scapegoat, and Covid had not made it any easier to accommodate him.

After Nopok’s father finished talking about his plans for the garden he had never grown (Covid did not stop plants from growing, he insisted), he did something that surprised his son: he turned into a Big Lots and stopped in the parking lot—just stopped.

“Hey,” Nopok’s father said, his voice strangely hesitant, “I just wanted you to know something.”

“Yeah?” Nopok said. His father had a strange, serious look in his eyes.

“I talked to your mother, and I told her what I wanted to do; about the garden, anyway, and she said that you could come home on school days as long as you work the garden while you’re there.”

Nopok paused, unable to fight back an incredulous look. “What?”

His father froze. Maybe he had expected thanks for the apparent offer. He had probably gone out of his way to get this agreement, especially considering how bad the argument with Nopok's mother had to have been in the first place. He certainly seemed proud of the offer.

"She said that, yeah," his father said, sounding a bit confused at his son's tone. "I had to talk to her for a long time, you know. We worked out a lot of things today. A lot of things. Things we put off for way too long."

He trailed off, and Nopok began to worry. His father just wasn't his usual, talkative self. Something big had to be wrong.

"Like what?" Nopok said cautiously, not wanting to push too hard. His father let out a long exhale.

"I'm going to, uh, go away for a little while. It's not a divorce, it's just...giving each other time."

Nopok froze, processing the words. Without thinking, he said, "Not a divorce?"

"A separation," his father said, excited for a moment, as if he had been struggling to find the right word. He leaned forward, and the enthusiasm disappeared slowly, painfully. "I know. I brought it up, though, getting one. A divorce, I mean. Your mother said no, it sounded like too much trouble. She never likes the legal part of stuff like this. It intimidates her. She's never even looked at our marriage certificate, not even after I had it framed. So, I told her I could go live somewhere else for a little while and send money home."

Nopok's father paused, and then just stopped for a moment. "It makes sense, right?"

Nopok said nothing. After a moment, his father put his hands on the steering wheel and squeezed.

“I know what you’re thinking, but I thought that she would leave me. I had to act first. It’s what I had to do.”

“Dad?” Nopok started, but then he froze. His father leaned against the steering wheel, breathing in hard. It looked like he would cry. Nopok said nothing at first, but eventually chimed in when he thought the silence had gone on for too long.

“I’m sorry, dad. That sounds really complicated.”

It was as honest a statement as Nopok could think to make. His father nodded, visibly struggling to compose himself.

“Yeah,” his father said, “it is.”

They both sat in the car together for what felt like hours before Nopok’s father unlocked the doors and added, “Want to go inside? Loosen up, maybe?”

Nopok said yes, and they left the car and entered into the store. Inside, Nopok checked his phone and saw that only about fifteen full minutes had passed. His father took him through every section of the store, stopping often to note something about the store brand items, all items you could “only find at Big Lots.” He spoke about the products with a strange admiration that Nopok did not understand or sympathize with.

“Okay,” his father said as they rounded the hardware department and reentered the aisle in the middle of the store. “Is there anything you want?”

He drew a crumpled twenty-dollar bill out of his pocket, as if he needed to prove to his son that he could afford to pay.

Nopok paused, not sure what to say, or even if there was a right thing to say. He nodded after a moment, and then they walked together, looking at the different sections of the store. Nopok’s father stopped at the tools, inspecting everything from shovels to drills to craft picks.

Long ago, Nopok's father had almost gone to an art school, but Nopok had never actually seen his father do anything with his old skills. Only in moments like this, when his father gazed longingly at crafts supplies, did it even seem like his father had an artistic side to him. Unless planning a garden for years counted as art.

“See anything you like?” Nopok's father asked as they moved towards the toy section.

“Maybe,” Nopok said, nervous as he stared down at the look of expectation in his father's eyes. “Why don't we, uh, go look at some stuff for the garden?”

A light returned to his father's eyes, and for the next ten minutes, they browsed seeds and pottery and fertilizers. Nopok's father blazed through details that Nopok could barely even pretend to pay attention to. He groaned several times out of boredom, but carefully turned to the side each time so that his father could not see him.

His father, meanwhile, had taken off with a surge of energy that lasted all the way back to the car.

“Looks good,” Nopok's father said as he plopped a bag of seeds and pots onto the back seat and just stared at them, as if inspecting a prize catch. He then took the driver's seat. “So, you're serious about taking care of the garden, huh?”

Nopok almost wanted to take a picture of his father's smile. “Yeah,” he said, “I guess I am.” An awkward pause followed, and Nopok broke it with, “So, you're going away? Will you be checking in, or coming back anytime?”

His father's smile disappeared, but there was still a hint of positivity in his voice. Forced positivity, as fake as anything Nopok had told himself saying that things would be okay.

“We'll see.”

* * *

Whatever had happened between Nopok's parents while he was at school, his mother seemed to have nothing new to say about it when he and his father arrived at the house. She simply allowed them to go inside and then gave his father until the end of the afternoon to move his things into his car. Sammy stayed in his room and did not come out, not even to say hello. Nopok did not try to bother him, even when his father asked him to see if Sammy had time to help.

"I'll take care of it," Nopok said. His father did not push him for an explanation.

As Nopok packed his father's belongings into cardboard Amazon and Ebay boxes, he knew that things were different this time. In the past, he had been sure that his father would leave and not return. The first time it happened, his parents had been fighting in front of the house. Nopok could still remember how his father had marched towards the car as his mother screamed at him not to leave. Only five years old, Nopok had grabbed the family's Bible and run out in front of the car, begging his father not to leave. Both of his parents had been stupefied by his display. Later, his father had asked him not to do it again. "You can't just jump in like that. What was happening was between me and your mother, okay?"

Only later did he remember to warn Nopok not to dart in front of moving vehicles—the obvious lesson to teach a child.

Nopok had been too embarrassed to interfere so directly again in his parents' arguments. Instead, he had simply watched their fights unfold countless times over the years, each time struggling with his own anxiety over the future. Eventually, he had tried to beat that anxiety for

good by accepting what his father had tried to teach him early on, that these fights were their business, not his. What right did he have to do anything other than observe and wait for the inevitable?

But now, here he was feeling that same sense of uncertainty from the first fight, though now it resounded more as a profound feeling of loss, as if he knew that this time, there was no going back. His father was leaving. Neither of them knew when—or if—he was coming back.

Nopok wanted to cry as he packed his father's textbooks from high school, but something held him back, a faint feeling of been-there, done-that. Maybe it had been too obvious what would happen. Everyone had seen it coming except his parents. They had tried to keep things together for so long, even when every interaction was strained.

His father eventually came by to see if he was packing the right things. They worked together for some time stuffing random things into boxes, and then on their way to the car, Nopok's father stopped in the doorway.

“You can, uh, keep my old school books. Maybe you'll learn more from them that I did.”

Nopok's father had meant it to be a sentimental statement, something meaningful to leave to his child. The sad thing was, Nopok wanted to feel that way. His father really had defended him so many times in arguments. He had even tried to work out a deal to keep Nopok at the house. In trying to respond, Nopok felt a pressure in his throat that kept him from answering immediately, but he knew it was not sadness, not completely.

It was awkwardness. This just all felt so forced.

“Dad?” he finally asked, trying to sound emotional.

“Yeah?” His father looked down at him with a curious expression, like he was having visible difficulty reading Nopok's own look.

“I’d like to keep in touch, you know. Will you keep talking to me?”

Nopok’s words felt wooden on his tongue. He cursed himself for not coming up with something better. Change had finally come to the family, and this was the best he could muster up?

There was a pause. “Yeah, of course. Call me when you can. Text me, too.” There was an awkward silence, and his father finally added, “Oh yeah, I want to see pictures of the garden once you’ve got it going.”

They went out to the car, and Nopok’s father handed him the Big Lots bag of seeds. Neither of them had bothered to take them into the house.

“I will,” Nopok said, hearing his own words like they were an alien echo from his own lungs. He thought about how he never seemed to finish what he started. He wondered if his father knew that.

Maybe in an ideal world, his father had really meant for the idea of the garden to be meaningful, something to boost his confidence. “Here,” he might say, “is a thing that a man can do to prove to himself that he can make his life better.” Nopok’s father had never actually said anything like that—neither of them were articulate enough to make points like that in person—but Nopok wanted to think that his father aspired to that kind of inspiration speaking.

However, his father’s words had sounded so listless, as if the task of handing the garden off to Nopok had drained it of all significance to him.

“I’ll grow it,” Nopok said, “I’ll plant all the seeds we bought today.”

His father smiled. “Thanks.”

Nopok wanted to believe that that smile said more than his father's words ever could; that with a gesture, he had communicated the message Nopok had wanted to hear from the man all his life. "I'm proud of you, son. I believe in you."

Near the end of the afternoon, minutes before eight o'clock pm, Nopok's father left without saying those words, or even putting in enough emotion to hint that he had wanted to. His goodbye was short, more like a routine goodbye before going shopping than a farewell before leaving the house indefinitely.

That night, Nopok went straight to his bed and laid there tossing and turning, already regretting the things he had not said to his father and the things his father had not said to him.

* * *

After his father left, Nopok had no energy left to go online, despite the fact that there was plenty of time and opportunity left to do so. He closed his laptop, left it in his room, and wandered downstairs. His mother had barricaded herself in her room and Sammy was wandering the kitchen looking for something to eat. Nopok checked the shelves with him and found a single remaining bag of apple-flavored instant oatmeal, one of Sammy's comfort foods.

"How's that?" Nopok said, finding that he was suddenly alone with his brother in the dining room. They had said nothing to each other since their father left, and the silence was beginning to grow tense.

Sammy grabbed the bag from the shelf, mixed the oatmeal with milk, and set it in the microwave. After an awkward moment, he said, "So that's it, huh? Dad just left."

"Yeah," Nopok said. There was a pause.

"He didn't say anything to me," Sammy said, his voice taking on a bitter tone. "Did he say anything to you?"

"He asked me to get the garden going for him," Nopok said. His brother just stared at him for a while.

"He doesn't care about that," Sammy said.

"He was always talking about it."

"Dad's full of shit. He doesn't care about the garden, okay? He doesn't care about us either."

Nopok said nothing back. The microwave let out a ding, and Sammy grabbed his bowl of oatmeal. “Mom wanted to talk to you,” he added.

“Okay,” Nopok said. His brother gave him a strange look.

“Do you know if they’re getting a divorce?”

“I don’t think so,” Nopok said. “Dad said mom wasn’t interested.”

Sammy just shook his head, muttered something under his breath, and walked back to his room. Nopok let out a deep breath, feeling that he had somehow avoided the worst Sammy could have thrown at him.

Nopok wasn’t used to seeing Sammy get so upset. His younger brother usually seemed impervious to family drama, keeping to himself in his room or finding excuses to go out and meet friends. Nopok wondered how much pain Sammy was actually in right now. He decided to ask him about it later, once everyone’s tempers had time to cool down.

Nopok crossed the house to his mother’s room and knocked on the door. After a moment, his mother said, “Come in.”

Nopok walked in to find his mother at her old desk, apparently busying herself with a stack of paperwork. She glanced up and gave him a weary look, like she could barely keep herself awake.

“Did you talk to your father?” she asked, sounding unsure of herself.

“Yeah,” Nopok said, trying and failing to read her expression. If anything, she seemed to be trying to do the same to him.

“I thought you would go with him.”

“What?”

Nopok's mother paused, giving him a confused look at first, until a look of understanding crossed her face. "He didn't even ask you to go with him, did he?"

Nopok shook his head.

"I told him he could," his mother said. "If he wanted, and if you wanted to go."

"Dad didn't say anything to me," Nopok said. His mother shook her head and smiled, an indirect gesture saying that she didn't believe him. He then added, "He didn't, okay? He just asked me to plant the garden for him."

His mother sighed. "More unfinished business." After a brief pause, she continued, "You can plant it if you want."

Nopok waited to respond. His mother looked like she was mulling over something important in her head. After a moment, Nopok could tell that whatever it was, she did not intend to share it, so he just asked, "What about me? Can I stay?"

She said nothing.

"Can I come home after school?"

"Do what you want," she said. "I don't care anymore."

For some time, Nopok stood there silently. His mother returned to whatever she was working on, and the moment dragged on between them for too long, and she stiffened, unable even to look up at him in acknowledgment. Finally, Nopok just walked out of her room and closed the door behind him gently. He then went up to his room and booted up his computer. Gamefaqs flashed onto the screen, and at last he reclined in his seat, comfortable.

It was already half past 9 pm, and his mind was still racing from everything that had happened. Not the best state of mind for forum talk, but it was worse for doing schoolwork. He stared at the login screen, looking over his username, Nopok. He had been using the gamer tag

since he was six years old. It had all started with a Japanese role-playing game that allowed him to choose the name for his main character. The only issue had been the five-character limit for names. He had quickly thrown out the idea of using his own name—he hated his name, after all—but none of the names he had come up with had felt right. Nothing male, nothing female. So, he had begun thinking of custom names assembled from random sounds, something neutral. Eventually, after briefly considering borrowing the name of X-Pac, one of his favorite wrestlers, he had come up with the word Nopok. It still had the “pac” sound, but altered just a bit to match the “no” syllable. It was a name that suggested grayness and strength, a masked figure who could stand on his own against a world of monsters and demons. Nopok would go on to take the name through every role-playing game of his childhood, from *Dragon Quest* to *Final Fantasy* to *Baldur’s Gate*. Every time he created an account for a website, he used the name. Now, after all those years using it, the gamer tag was almost more familiar to him than his own name. Even just looking at it could boost his confidence, allowing him to slip into an identity that did not have any of the burdens of his personal life.

And yet, when he logged in and looked at his username, he just wasn’t feeling it. He closed the window, walked around the hall, and then rummaged through old Legos and game cases, letting nostalgia take him back to memories of getting them as presents. That night, he went to sleep still thinking back to old visits to K-Mart, Wal-Mart, and Toys-R-Us, and he dreamed that he and his father were walking through an endless supermarket, filling a shopping cart with a mix of gardening supplies and power tools and video games as they enjoyed each other’s company. Nopok awoke in the morning still thinking about the times when his father seemed happy, and how it seemed to have happened in a past that seemed too distant to remember clearly.

* * *

Sammy said very little on the way to school, only mentioning that their mom seemed to have gotten very little sleep the previous night.

“I stayed up until three in the morning, and I could still hear her in her room,” he said.

Nopok thought on it for a moment, and then replied, “I guess she was more upset than she looked.”

His brother nodded. “She was. Before dad brought you home, I saw her crying in the bathroom with the door open.”

“That’s awful,” Nopok said, not sure what else he could say. Sammy let out a labored breath.

“Yeah. They weren’t happy together, not for a long time. I guess I thought it would be easier for her.”

They were both silent for a while. Heavy rain beat down on the car, and seemed to make the other drivers on the road nervous.

“Memphis drivers in rain,” Nopok commented as a car swerved in front of them.

“It always brings out the best in people,” Sammy said.

After leaving the highway, Sammy asked, “How was dad yesterday? He drove you home. Did he say anything, or...”

“He was upset, at least yesterday morning he was upset,” Nopok said. For a moment, he hesitated to tell Sammy everything—their mother had always liked Sammy best, and their father usually gave in to their mother on everything—but then he saw the concern on Sammy’s face

and he realized that this was real talk, maybe the most they had opened up to each other since grade school.

“I mean,” Nopok continued, “on the way to school; that’s when he was *really* upset. I haven’t seen him get that upset in a long time. And then in the afternoon, he was completely out of it. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.”

“Sounds like dad,” Sammy said. “Any idea what happened?”

“Maybe he was just unhappy,” Nopok said. His brother let out a chuckle.

“Yeah.” There was a pause. “I think he’s wanted to leave mom for a long time, but, you know, maybe he didn’t know how to tell her. He’s not good at communication.”

“I know what that’s like,” Nopok said. His brother laughed, this time without any spite.

“Yeah, you always took after him. I thought you might understand him better than I do.”

“I don’t think so,” Nopok said. “He seemed confused that mom didn’t want a divorce, but I don’t think I’ve figured that out yet.”

Sammy shook his head. “Yeah. I think she wanted him gone, but not forever. Or maybe she doesn’t want to let something like a marriage go. You know how she gets about things. She doesn’t give up anything, doesn’t throw anything away unless she has to.”

Nopok found himself smiling. “I didn’t even know she had that side to her.”

This time, Sammy paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was a little shaky. “I, uh, don’t think she knows how to talk to you any better than she knows how to talk to dad.”

“Yeah,” Nopok said. They were nearing the university already, and he knew that he only had a few more moments to say anything, despite the fact that their conversation now felt so important, so necessary for both of them. “So, do you think I’m safe coming home now?”

“I don’t know,” Sammy said. “Probably. She won’t do anything else to change things, not for a while.”

“Yeah,” Nopok said, letting out a resigned sigh.

“Don’t worry about mom,” Sammy said. “I don’t think she’ll do anything to hurt you. She wants to be the good guy all the time, the moral center of her own life, and I think she feels sorry for you, deep down.”

“I don’t know,” Nopok said. “She sounded serious. She looked like she was ready to kick me out.”

“She was fighting with dad. You got mixed up in it. Now dad’s gone.”

“And I’m growing his shit in the back yard,” Nopok said.

Sammy laughed. “You’re not seriously going to do that, are you?”

Sammy stopped the car across the street from the political science building.

“I’d rather just go to the library,” Nopok said. “It’s kind of nice there. I could see myself staying there every day, until it was time to come home.”

“Do that, then,” Sammy said. “Fuck the garden. Dad can’t mess with you anymore.”

Nopok thought of the look on his father’s face yesterday, the weird happiness when he was talking about the garden, and then the suddenness with which he had lost it after handing the job to his son.

“I don’t know, though,” he said. “Maybe I’ll give it a chance: the garden, I mean.”

“Why?” Sammy asked.

Nopok paused for a moment, watching a campus security vehicle pass by. The officer’s look told them that it was definitely not okay to park on the side of the road. Nopok grabbed his bag and put it on his legs.

“I guess I want to show him that I can finish what I start,” he said, giving Sammy a serious look. Sammy’s irritated expression surprised him.

“You don’t have to prove anything to that man, Jeff.”

Nopok froze, unable to think of a response. When the campus security vehicle passed again, he stepped out the car and said, “It’s okay. I can handle it.”

Sammy looked disappointed, and gave him a wave goodbye as he took the road to his work.

* * *

Nopok was only one minute late to Professor Walters's class, but as he walked into the classroom, he could feel an instant hostility. Professor Walters stood still and silent at the front of the room, like a statue dedicated to every professor who lectured on the subject of being disappointed. The other students exchanged wide-eyed looks. Professor Walters directed Nopok to his seat with a finger. "Last one to arrive, Jeff. I'm glad you could make it today."

Nopok did not even look up at the teacher. He found an empty desk near the middle of the room and walked towards it, fumbling into several others on the way. The class felt unusually claustrophobic today, as if all the desks has been moved closer together. Professor Walters paced the front of the room, towering over the first row like an enormous minute hand ticking over the numbers of a clock.

"Is it too much to ask that you get here on time?" he said. No one responded. He took in a deep breath, and then raised a hand. "Pass up your summaries."

The classroom erupted with the sound of students opening their backpacks and bags. Nopok, however, stayed frozen in place. He had forgotten his written summary. With everything going on at home, he had not even started it.

No one was going to sympathize, he told himself. A man like Professor Walters did not accept excuses. Politics was a serious subject, more serious than trouble at home, and definitely more important than posting on a gaming forum.

Not knowing what to do, Nopok reached into his laptop bag and rifled through papers, just to put on a show of looking for it. He then folded his arms on his desk, trying to look

defeated. Other students began passing their papers forward. Nopok took the papers from the two students behind him and then offered them to the student in front of him. Professor Walters scanned the room. His gaze fell on Nopok as the papers moved, and Nopok knew by the sour expression on his professor's face that he had been caught.

Professor Walters retrieved the stacks of papers one-by-one. He glanced back at Nopok, who repeated the theater of looking for his paper.

"Anyone else?" Professor Walters asked. A handful of students held up their papers. After collecting the last submission, Professor Walters walked back to his spot hovering over the front row and began reading them.

"Looks fine," he mumbled, sight-reading an essay with visible coffee stains. He provided more commentary as he went along. "Lacking" followed the second, "Pitiful" described the fourth. Nopok looked away and lost count, but heard several more critical remarks, the worst culminating with "Godawful." After skimming the last, he set the stack down on the table and stared straight at Nopok.

"Your paper isn't there, Jeff."

Nopok said nothing in response. Some students turned and stared. Others avoided looking at him.

"Is there a reason why you couldn't write it?"

Nopok's lips trembled. He thought that perhaps, if he was brave enough, he could explain everything: his mother turning against him, his father leaving the house. He started to formulate the right words, but then he thought of all the time he had spent writing for the *Final Fantasy* forum, and he stopped. No excuses. Professor Walters shook his head.

“These written summaries are required. I ask you to write them because we cover entire books worth of material, and they are not easy to absorb. They’re for your benefit, everyone. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Nopok said, almost mumbling. From Professor Walters’s reaction, he knew he had said the wrong thing.

“Get out,” the teacher said. The entire class froze up. Nopok just sat there, not knowing what to do or say. He took in a deep breath, desperate to find the right words to diffuse the situation.

“I’m sorry,” he began, but the professor cut in before he could continue.

“No excuses: get out. If you want to come back, get serious and do the work required of you to pass this class.”

Nopok looked around at the other students. They looked mortified. “Go,” Professor Walters added, and Nopok scooped his mechanical pencil and notebook into his bag and stood up. He did not look back at anyone before going to the door, but glanced back as he exited. He had never before seen a teacher get as angry and Professor Walters looked.

Outside, he stood by the door, wondering what he could possibly say to fix things. After a moment, he could hear the professor begin the lecture. Not knowing what else to do, Nopok sat down on the ground next to the door and listened, taking notes and trying to stifle tears.

* * *

Nopok's father texted him just after he finished getting situated in the computer lab.

"How's it going today?" It seemed so casual, not like his father at all, but when the text came, Nopok was in just the right mood to share his thoughts, or at least vent them.

"I'm thinking about changing my major."

"I thought you were excited about politics," his father replied. Nopok could not tell if it was sarcastic, so he decided to be careful in his reply.

"I just don't think I get along with the professors."

As he waited for the reply, he replaced the paper in the printer and checked the chalkboard above his station, just to make sure that no one had scribbled anything obscene on it. When he checked his phone again, he saw his father's reply, just an eyes rolling emoji, and wondered if he needed to bother replying at all.

"So," Nopok typed, "How are you doing? Where did you stay last night?"

There was no immediate reply. Nopok wondered if his father would even tell him something like that. After five minutes, he logged on to his computer and sat there, anxious, wondering if he should do something to settle his thoughts or wait patiently. It was times like that reminded Nopok just how little work he actually did in the lab. None of the students who regularly came expected anything of him, and most of the newcomers seemed to only want to be left alone.

Out of habit, Nopok opened the forum and pulled up his login. He felt embarrassed to be back. Yesterday afternoon, he had told Gizmos that he would be back in thirty minutes. Nopok

was afraid of how the people at the forum had reacted to him not showing up again. Would they think he was flakey and not want to RP with him? After the elation of having such a good time yesterday, he worried that he had failed everyone else somehow.

He checked his phone again and again; nothing from his father. He typed in his username. The impact of his fingers against the keys gave him a familiar feeling. He followed it up with the password, and then, feeling that he had gone too far to back out now, he logged in. The *Final Fantasy IV* forum showed up in a recommended communities section on the website's home page.

They were probably upset with him, and they had every right to be. But he wanted to participate in their community. He needed this. Even if he was afraid, it was worth it to face whatever blame they had to give him, apologize for everything, and then beg to be accepted back on. Nopok was more than familiar with enduring a cycle of blame—he had gone through too many with his family to count, and he had survived every argument. He had even survived his father finally leaving. He could make it through whatever the people on the forum put him through, and he would do it too—anything for a chance to grasp that feeling he had experienced yesterday, the excitement he had felt when playing Clair. When being Clair.

Because right now, being that other self—being Jeff—felt too nebulous and frightening to be worth considering.

Nopok followed the links to the forum and found the RP topic, which was at the top of the board. A brief look at the number of posts told him why: yesterday, the RP had featured thirty posts. Today, it was at over forty-five.

They had moved on without him. He had known that they would, but having proof of it in front of him was still upsetting. He was afraid to read how far they had gone. If they had

advanced the scene far enough, someone would have taken control of Clair. In that situation, he could only hope that it had been Typhoon, the one who would be running the story, but he could not stop thinking about how Gizmos had controlled Clair in his post.

Nopok never wanted someone to take over Clair again. Ever. She was *his* character. He could put feelings into her that he had forgotten he could even have.

Nopok opened the topic and saw that there were four pages of responses now. He jumped to the last page and then went back to page three. At the top, he found his back-and-forth posts with Gizmos. Reading them again, he couldn't help but note how short they were. Scrolling down, he found the first reply. It had come from Luminous.

[Scott, hearing the obvious sounds of a struggle, barrels up the stairs to the second floor and finds the clash between two figures. With just a glance, he sees a man with an eerie aura and a wicked rapier towering over a woman cloaked in the garb of an assassin, and that tells him all he needs to know about the situation. He throws himself in between the two and holds up his hands. "Please hold! I don't know what happened between you two, but we can resolve this without fighting!"]

It seemed like a fine display of nobility, basically a stereotype of the Lawful Good character you would expect from a paladin. Nopok was surprised that Scott had not thrown out the angle of rescuing the damsel in distress. Even though the moment for directly replying to Luminous's post was over with, Nopok still imagined the look on Clair's face as the knight dived in front of her conversation with the vampire. She would probably have frowned and avoided looking at him, embarrassed that someone had come in to save her when she so obviously didn't need it.

Another part of her, thought, might have been impressed that he had risked himself to stop a fight when other paladins might have begun one themselves after seeing a vampire. In these fantasy stories, the “good” characters rarely spared anything they saw as evil, undead included.

Gizmos’s reply was short and contained elements of what Nopok would have included in his own. *[Void scoffed at the knight’s intrusion and sheathed his rapier. “It’s resolved,” he said, looking irritated. “And we did it without your help, thank you very much. As for what happened between us, that has yet to be determined.” The vampire grins in Clair’s direction.]*

Nopok couldn’t help but smile at Gizmos’s posts. The moderator was trying to inject humor into the story, and it was working.

Luminous’s reaction had come less than five minutes later. *[Scott turns away, visibly repulsed by the man’s obvious attempts to seduce the woman, whose expression seemed to suggest a guarded approach to the encounter. “I would hope,” Scott says, “that you will stay courteous to this woman.” He then inspects the man and detects the subtle, but unsettling aura around him. “You must be the lord of this manor: the dreaded vampire that the villagers were so afraid of. You may seem a bit...dubious, but you certainly don’t look like the terror they made you out to be.” The knight steps forward, offering the vampire his hand. “My name is Scott. I am a knight of Sarune, or at least I was. My knighthood is on hold, at least until I come to understand the true nature of the world. Only then will I be able to discern good from evil truly and without regret.”]*

Gizmos had fired off a retort in minutes. *[Void whistles and says, “Still finding yourself, eh Scott? How noble.” After a moment, Void reaches for Scott’s hand, only to fake him out and pull it back. Seeing the knight’s reaction, he smiles and shakes Scott’s hand after all. “Call me*

Void. I take it you're not here to kill me, then? And here I was worried that the good General Donnell of Baron intended to have me roasted on a spit."]

Luminous had not offered a reply right away. They had probably started waiting for Nopok to come in and post. After an hour, they had apparently decided to stop waiting, because Typhoon had come in to continue the scene. The next several posts unveiled plot details. The obvious plot hook character of General Donnell, a name Typhoon had likely asked Gizmos to include in his post, was detailed in full. The general was one of Gideon's direct superiors, and was indeed responsible for the order to kill the vampire. Gideon, suspecting foul play, had intended to question the vampire instead of attacking him. Void appreciated the gesture, and reciprocated with information that Typhoon had probably put together to give the group their next goal.

[Void addresses the knights and the assassin, looking deadly serious. "Donnell has been purging Baron of all opposition to the country's resurgence. No threat is too small. It's likely that your next target would have been the Mist Cave and the guardians living there."]

Luminous's reaction showed that Scott did not believe that the king of Baron would do such a thing, repeating the same mistakes that had caused a war in the past (which was itself a reference to the game's plot). Typhoon then moved in to affirm Void's suspicions.

["I wouldn't be so sure," Gideon says, giving Scott a concerned look. "I've known the king all my life, and I do not believe that the man I've served all that time would approve of the orders I received to kill Void here. The king has changed."]

Gizmos's reply came in less than two minutes, and it was the shortest reply yet in the RP topic. *["The king is likely dead," Void says. "Replaced with a monster loyal to the general."]*

At that, the third page was over, and Nopok was already filled with regret for not coming back to be a part of the conversation. And there was still a fourth page of responses. Now, he was definitely worried about how far the story had progressed. Already, Clair's silence was apparent. Her interactions with Void had ended so abruptly. Maybe Nopok could say that she had simply refused to speak after Void's flirtations, but he felt like that forced his hand. Would Clair actually respond to them? The story's flow seemed to demand that she wouldn't, but he began to wonder. Maybe it would even be fun to respond to them. Nopok had never had real experience with flirting. He had been too nervous to do it in grade school, and no one had ever hit on him directly. It was a part of his life he rarely tried to think about. Role play, he thought, might be his best opportunity to explore it. If he could get it right.

Hoping that there might still be opportunities, he opened the fourth page. The top post was from Luminous, who continued the scene after Typhoon's big infodump.

[Scott folds his arms and considers the situation. The parallels to events of the past worries him, and he is not afraid to express his fears. "If the situation is that dire, then what should we do? I don't think we can risk returning to Baron, not without the means to confront Donnell. But the moment we make it obvious that Gideon is not following his orders as given, we become enemies of the most powerful nation in the world."]

Typhoon's reply provided Gideon's response.

[Gideon listens to Scott and Void's opinions on the situation and gives them some thought. He tries to hide the doubt and indecision gnawing away at him, but he still shows his frustration. "I'm not going to slaughter the king's or the general's political enemies for him. I didn't become a knight to do that. I wanted to save the world, not destroy it."]

Gizmos's reply was sassy. [*“Big talk,” Void says, smiling at the noble sentiments expressed by the knight. “But if you want to prove you’ve got what it takes to save anyone, you should start by protecting those guardians of Mist from your country’s hired goons.”*]

With that, Typhoon moved the scene forward, His post did exactly what Nopok had feared would happen: it moved the group, Clair included, to a new location. The actual post described how Scott, Gideon, Void, and Clair left the mansion and headed north, venturing through open plains and passing a small desert region in the middle of Baron's territory. The journey itself apparently took about a day's travel. Typhoon began the new scene at the site of their camp, an area flanked by hills that hid the group's tents from view of the main road to the Mist Cave, their intended destination. Once the group was settled, Typhoon described Gideon's anxiety. The hook for this scene, it seemed, would be for the group to confront him and then discuss what they would be doing the next day. Nopok expected the typical character interactions that many video games used such scenes to convey: worry about the conflict ahead, doubt, and a general anxiety about the state of the world. In some games, the plot would coincide with something like monsters becoming more aggressive or awakening from a long slumber. So far, Typhoon had not introduced that as an element to the story. Nopok wondered if he would.

Reading onward, Nopok was surprised to find that the actual RP posts seemed to cut out after the camp scene was established. Camarilla had come on and, after apologizing for cutting into the story while it was in progress, asked if it was okay for her to post her character sheet here.

[*Sure,*] Typhoon said in a reply. [*We only have the one topic, so we sort of have to cram discussions and story posts into the same place. Sorry.*]

So far, the rest of the fourth page had been filled with Camarilla and Typhoon's back and forth posts about what her character would be. Eventually, she posted a character sheet that surprised Nopok so much that he almost doubled over in his seat laughing. A few students from the lab even noticed as he muttered the name and description of the character to himself.

[Name: Alexandra. Race: Talking Dog. Class: Wizard.]

Typhoon, apparently, was left stunned by the post too. His reply came almost fifteen minutes later. *[That's...wow. That should be interesting to role play with lol cool!]*

Somehow, Nopok felt a little better after seeing Camarilla's idea. All he needed to do now was figure out how to get Clair back into the story. As he continued his work in the lab, changing the toner of the printer and then helping a few people figure out how to reset their university passwords, he thought about what to post. He tried to imagine how Clair would react to a talking dog. Just the thought of it made him smile. He felt a little foolish for letting himself get so worked up. This was a *Final Fantasy* role play, after all: of course it was going to get silly at some point. He told himself that he needed to calm down and to try to enjoy the experience. There was no reason to let stress get in the way of his role playing.

Finally, Nopok decided to use his own feelings as inspiration for Clair's response to everything.

[Clair says nothing to Void as he comes on to her. She averts her eyes, not knowing what to say, and when the words finally come to her, the moment has passed, so she stays silent and listens to Scott and Void interact. Scott's noble sentiments leave her feeling strange. Ordinarily, she would scoff at such heroics, but there is something different about Scott. She cannot help but wonder why he feels so strongly about making peace with the vampire. She smiles at Void's witty comebacks. Despite his aggression against her, Void is proving to be more than his reputation

would suggest. By the time Gideon comes onto the scene, Clair finds herself drawn more and more to these people.

Gideon, then, brings in additional context to the circumstances that led to all of them meeting in the first place. The story of General Donnell seems to suggest that the world is on the edge of repeating some of its darkest days. Clair listens intently, but is still not sure what to make of it. For much of her life, she has been confined to immediate family, which meant politics were absent from her life. Outside of what her master and instructors told her, she knows little about the actual country of Baron. Based on Gideon's account of General Donnell, Clair wonders if she has missed out on anything important by staying isolated. Maybe, she thinks, it would be wise for her to continue staying away from people. And yet, as she listens to Scott, Gideon, and Void, she feels that she has found a group of people who care about the world.

As they decide to head north to protect the guardians of the Mist Cave, the group turns to her, wondering what she will do. Without saying a word, Clair follows them. Their journey through the Baron countryside takes all day. By the time they stop, Clair has made her decision. After the campfire is set, she approaches Gideon, who sits alone staring at the flames, and says,

"Sir Gideon, may I sit with you?" She takes a seat without waiting for an answer. "I just wanted to say that I appreciate what you're doing here. It seems like you're really trying to do the right thing, to do good in the world. I...I think I need that right now. I need people like you."]

With that, Nopok finished his post. He read it several times and was happy with both its length and its impact. Clair's words at the end mirrored what Nopok wanted to say to Typhoon. The RP was turning out to be much more than an experiment in socializing. Nopok thought about it while walking around campus, while listening to lectures in class, and while avoiding his family at home.

For a few minutes, Nopok just sat there looking at his post. It occurred to him that perhaps Typhoon or Gizmos had messaged him yesterday, and that it would be worth checking out the inbox just to make sure. But then, a rush of fear swept through him. What if no one liked his post? He had made it so long and detailed, but was that enough to make up for his absence? He worried at what kind of reply he would get in the topic. Then, he worried that if he checked his inbox, he would find a flood of messages asking him where he was, what he was doing, and why he wasn't posting. His parents, after all, had sent him so many similar text messages that it felt routine to be hounded by probing questions.

Suddenly, Nopok felt his phone vibrate against the desk. He turned to see a text from his father reading, "Call me." He grabbed the phone and walked out of the lab.

* * *

Nopok leaned against the wall outside the lab and dialed his father. He took several deep breaths, trying to steady his feelings. Generally, Nopok felt like an emotional wreck, but he did not want his father to know how bad he felt. He had always tried to avoid showing weakness to his father, but his family always seemed to catch him when he felt most vulnerable.

Before he was ready to talk, Nopok's father answered and said, "Hey, son."

"Hey," Nopok said. "What's up?"

"So you, uh, asked me where I stayed last night. I thought you deserved an answer. I'm sorry it took me so long to call."

"It's okay," Nopok said, stunned at the hesitation in his father's voice. "I was just a little worried. You left without saying anything about where you were going."

In the silence that followed, Nopok wished he had asked about it yesterday. He had spent all that time packing alongside his father without ever asking something so simple.

"Yeah, I know," his father said. "Listen, I just wanted to call and touch base with you on that. I didn't mean to worry you. I'm fine. I'm with a...a friend up in Millington."

Nopok's father stressed the word friend in a way Nopok did not quite understand. He thought about asking about it, but finally just settled on a safe response. "I'm glad you had a place to stay."

"Yeah," his father replied awkwardly. "Tom's been here for me, and I'm thankful for that."

"Tom?"

“Yeah. My friend, his, uh, his name’s Tom Bell. I’ve known him for a long time, since high school, in fact.”

“That’s cool,” Nopok said, surprised by how many pauses his father was leaving for him to respond. His father clearly wanted to say more, and wanted Nopok to be an active part of the conversation. Nopok wasn’t sure whether to be concerned or grateful.

“So,” Nopok continued, “You’re staying with him?”

“Yeah. I’ve still got all my things in boxes, but I’m making it.”

“That’s good,” Nopok said. He started to walk to his right towards the soda machines.

“Tell him I said thanks.”

“I will,” his father said. After a moment, he added, “So, are you at school right now, or...?”

“At work, yeah.” Nopok put a dollar into a Coke machine.

“Oh, sorry,” his father said. “I don’t want to keep you if you’re busy.”

“That’s okay, dad,” Nopok said. “It’s kind of a slow day.” His father said nothing at first, and Nopok used the time to order a Mountain Dew. When his father stayed silent, Nopok scrambled to come up with something to add. “So, uh, tell me about Tom’s place. Is it nice?”

“Yeah, it is,” his father said. “It’s tucked back in the countryside, real out of the way. You can’t even see it unless you know where to look. It’s nice to have that kind of privacy.”

“I bet,” Nopok said. The Mountain Dew can popped out of its holder and fell. As Nopok reached down for it, he thought about his father’s words.

“It sounds nice,” Nopok said. “I, uh, I hope you do okay out there, dad.”

There was a pause before his father answered, this time in a voice that quivered with something resembling both happiness and sadness. “Thanks, son. I hope you’re okay too.”

The rest of the conversation played out with just small talk, winding its way to an ending where his father said a rare “I love you” and hung up.

Nopok stayed in the vending machine area for minutes just thinking about how his father had sounded, how different it felt to have him gone but not unreachable.

Did his mother suspect anything? As smart as she was, she had to. What if she asked Nopok about it? He had never been able to lie to her, much less conceal anything important. She would find out, if she didn’t already know. Nopok just hoped it would not need to come from him.

He returned to his desk in the lab with half the Mountain Dew left. Energized by the sugar and caffeine, he checked his messages inbox at the forum without thinking, and then clicked the one at the top, a short message from Typhoon that had come yesterday around 8:00 pm.

[We missed you today. You okay?]

Nopok smiled and typed his response without the need to consider what he would say. *[Yeah, I’m okay now. Just a little overwhelmed by life.]* He sent it and then waited for the response, which came after about ten minutes.

[Glad to hear you’re all right,] Typhoon replied. *[I know life can be pretty tough. I loved your post, though. Great job getting Clair caught up. I’ll be on to get a reply in later this afternoon. How about you?]*

[Not sure yet,] Nopok typed. *[I might be available later, I might not. I’ll get back with you on that.]*

* * *

Sammy texted Nopok ten minutes before the lab closed to let him know that he would be a little late, but by no more than ten minutes or so. Nopok told him that that sounded fine and then spent some time walking around campus. It was almost sunset, and the sky was turning a shade of bright red. The plants around campus, highlighted by the maroon sky, seemed to take on a completely different character, projecting an air of serenity, as if the entire world was slowing down and gradually freezing in a red haze. Nopok sat by the road and watched the street lights power on as he waited, until finally, Sammy pulled up in his car and they started back towards their house together.

“How was everything?” Sammy asked, sounding a bit awkward.

“It was okay,” Nopok said. “I mean, class was awful, but work was all right. How about you?”

Sammy shook his head and let out a long breath. “I hate my boss, I hate my job, and I hate my life.”

Nopok paused. Sammy sounded frustrated, unusually so. “You want to talk about it?”

Sammy took a sharp turn, and Nopok suddenly feared that maybe agitating his brother was not a good idea while he was driving.

“My boss is an asshole,” Sammy said. “That’s it.” The way he stopped, Nopok knew there was more to what he wanted to say.

“Did something happen?” Nopok said. Sammy slowed down, and then pulled into the parking lot of a familiar store, one dedicated to hobbies and import goods. During their

childhood, they had used to visit it together with their parents. Nopok had probably not been in the parking lot for years, much less entered the store.

“You want to go inside?” Sammy said after a moment of just staring down at the wheel.

“Sure,” Nopok said. Sammy led the way walking towards the store and said nothing until they entered. A jingle greeted them, and they quickly found a spot next to a glass display case, where they admired vintage Transformers and Gundam figures inside.

After spending some time pointing out the names of the characters and remarking about the quality of the toys, Sammy said, “You know, I’ve been in the closet about my collecting for a long time.”

“What do you mean?” Nopok said.

“I mean that I never stopped, not since middle school. Even though I told mom and dad that I did.”

“I didn’t know,” Nopok said. He thought about how infrequently he had actually been in his brother’s room in the last few years.

“I hide it,” Sammy said. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I don’t ever feel comfortable talking about myself. Don’t want the attention.”

Sammy looked irritated. Nopok knew that he needed to use a light touch with his brother now.

“You’re talking to me now,” Nopok said.

Sammy shook his head. “Yeah, because I feel like I’d explode if I didn’t talk to someone, and you’re the only one who’d get me on this stuff.”

Nopok knew that something was wrong. It was not like Sammy at all to speak so openly like this. With the family, Sammy would either join in everybody’s jokes at Nopok’s expense or

be the target of them himself. Otherwise, he was always guarded. Since things had gotten bad with their parents, though, Sammy had been opening up, and Nopok was not sure how to say or do. He was the older brother, so was he supposed to just listen?

He told himself that he could do that much. He and Sammy had been close when they were young. They had played all the same games, shared the same toys. As they got older, Nopok took his interest in games further and Sammy claimed all the toys. They had gone their separate ways, interest-wise, and drifted apart. The fact that their parents had played favorites made that growing distance between them so much worse.

“Well,” Nopok finally said, “if you need to talk, I’ll listen.” He looked around. A single other customer was looking towards them, but turned away after being spotted. “You want to talk in the car?” he added, not wanting to hold such a private conversation in such a public place.

“Sure,” Sammy said. “I don’t see anything I want right now anyway. Or anything I can afford.”

After stopping to look at just a few more toys, Nopok and Sammy left the store and returned to the car. It was cold outside now, and the sun had almost disappeared over the horizon. Sammy put his keys in and waited to turn the car back on. He looked around, as if trying to gather his thoughts, and Nopok joined him in watching cars move around them. Despite it being after 6 pm, there was still a bit of late afternoon traffic zipping by the nearby Interstate ramp. Just looking at all the cars, Nopok tried to imagine driving so fast while being boxed in between too many vehicles. Just the thought of it made him nervous. No one had ever sympathized with his fear of driving. His parents had actively mocked it, and so had Sammy, off and on. Nopok wondered if his brother had meant it, though, or if it was just another example of their parents pitting them against each other.

He turned towards his brother, who let out a long exhale. Sammy looked nervous. Nopok wondered what he was thinking. Nopok wanted to say something to ease the tension in the car, but there was still a tension between that was hard to explain and impossible to ignore.

“You all right?” Nopok finally asked.

Sammy nodded and replied, “Yeah, I’m just thinking about what I want to say. I kind of lost my train of thought.”

“That’s all right,” Nopok said. He thought about asking Sammy to turn on the car, just because having it on might make them both feel better, but he decided against it. It was probably not a good idea to leave the car idling. Sammy rubbed his forehead and looked out the window, avoiding eye contact as he began to speak.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I guess I’m thinking about big stuff.”

“Yeah?” Nopok said. “Like what?”

There was a pause. “Like how nobody taught me how to live. You know what I mean?”

Nopok thought on it. “I’m not sure.”

“Mom and dad didn’t teach us how to think. They were always at work. I used to think it was normal for your parents to be gone every day until 7 pm, but it’s not.”

“No,” Nopok said. “I wish they had been around more.”

“Why?” Sammy said. “So they could push you around some more? Look...” Sammy paused, taking in a deep breath and trying to collect himself. He looked like he was on the verge of an emotional meltdown. “Mom taught us never to say anything negative, unless *they* were saying it, of course. You know?”

“Yeah,” Nopok said. “They could criticize us, but never the other way around. We had to always agree with them too.”

“Exactly.” Sammy looked almost relieved. He turned the key and opened his car window. Nopok did the same. “I feel like I’m not prepared for anything,” Sammy continued. “Mom and dad kept pressuring me to get my job. Make some money, they said. Like that would fix everything.”

“Yeah,” Nopok said. He wanted to add more, maybe say something about how he didn’t get a sense of satisfaction from his part time job, like their parents expected, but Sammy looked determined to keep going, like he was trying to express something important, and that he could lose it if interrupted.

“I’m tired of losing all my time and my life to my job,” he said. “I try so hard to have the right attitude, but I don’t know what that is. Should I just be positive all the time, even if I’m miserable? I’ve tried that, and I don’t feel it.”

There was a pause. “I didn’t know you felt so bad,” Nopok said. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Sammy said. For a moment, he was silent. He scratched his face and then rolled his window back up. Nopok rolled his up as well, if just to make Sammy more comfortable. “It’s not your fault,” Sammy eventually said. “Our parents screwed us up. Mom likes me, and Dad likes you. They were wrong to play favorites.”

Nopok nodded. Sammy looked happy to get a position reply, even if it was just a gesture.

“And it’s not like I got a lot from them pressuring me to work. You know what I spend all my money on? Collectibles. Toys.”

“I didn’t know,” Nopok said. His brother winced a little, and he added, “Still the same stuff we got as kids?”

“Yeah,” Sammy said, looking relieved. “Legos, Star Wars, robots, all that stuff.”

There was a pause. Sammy looked like he was at a loss as to what to say next. “I’d like to see them sometime,” Nopok said. Sammy smiled.

“Yeah. I’ll have to get them out. I keep them in my closet. Got them in boxes so that if Mom and Dad want to come in, they won’t see anything. I’ve got to be careful, too. You know how Mom is. She can smell a lie a mile away.”

“Yeah,” Nopok said. “She always knows.”

Soon, Sammy started the car, and as they started driving home together, Nopok and his brother talked about Sammy’s collection. For the first time in forever, Sammy seemed happy to talk to his brother, and Nopok was happy to listen.

* * *

The two brothers tried to enter the house quietly, but the front door was heavy and loud due to the hinge being slightly damaged by wear. As soon as they entered, their mother called out for Sammy, and he left Nopok in the drawing room. The sounds of the conversation were impossible to miss, as the house was strangely silent. What amazed Nopok was that not once did his mother bring him up. From what he could hear, she and Sammy talked about the utilities bill, his insurance for the car, and a request for Sammy to chip in for a car for Nopok. Sammy answered in brief statements, and their mother paused whenever he answered, as if she was lost in thought. Finally, she told Sammy that he could go and then asked him to “send your brother in.” Sammy met Nopok in the living room, and they both shared a dumbfounded moment.

“She’s asking for you,” Sammy said. Nopok nodded, and Sammy shook his head.

“How is she?” Nopok asked. Sammy gave him a strange look, as if he had not expected the question.

“I think things are sinking in,” he said. “Dad’s not here, and she’s got a lot to handle on her own. Don’t say anything to upset her, okay?”

“She sounds worried about the bills,” Nopok said. Sammy looked towards the television, a 40-inch plasma TV that their father had bought during a Black Friday sale. “Do you think she can handle them all?”

“She asked me to help with that,” Sammy said. “But really, I don’t know what her situation’s like. She never gives specifics.”

“I know,” Nopok said. “I’ve never known how much they make. They never shared that part of their lives with us.”

“Yeah,” Sammy said.

“I’ve asked them to,” Nopok said. “We’ll have to deal with finances too, eventually, and pay taxes and make a budget.”

“Don’t get upset,” Sammy said, looking concerned.

Nopok realized that he was raising his voice.

“I won’t,” he said, not wanting to ruin the goodwill they had built up between them. He reminded himself that they were together on this now. They were both living with their mother, and it would be easier for both of them if they found a way to get along.

“I’ll talk to her,” Nopok added. Sammy nodded in approval.

“Just try to be nice. I think she just doesn’t know how to talk to you yet.”

“Yeah.”

Sammy took in a deep breath. “She thinks about dad every time she sees you. It’s not her fault, you know. The man led her on.”

“What do you mean?” Nopok asked. His brother shook his head.

“It’s just...I don’t know. Never mind. I just want things to be easy. We all need to get some stability back in our lives.”

Nopok tried to hide his confusion. He could not tell if he succeeded. “Yeah, that sounds good to me.”

“It wouldn’t take much for everything to be easy,” Sammy said. “If we could all just get along, I know we could ride this out, maybe even be happy to live here.”

“I’d like that,” Nopok said, smiling. At least with his brother, he now believed that a breakthrough was possible. There was still no telling if he could get anywhere with his mother, but maybe Sammy was right.

It would be nice to live in this house without fear.

After a moment, he walked to his mother’s room and thought about knocking on the door. Usually, his mother replied with a snappy “What?” As if the interruption unsettled her. He decided that it would probably be better to just open the door slowly, turning the knob so that she could hear it for a moment before the door opened. That way, she could voice her objection to anyone coming in, just in case she changed her mind about seeing him. As soon as he touched the knob, it creaked, and his mother asked him to come in.

She was at her desk, her chair raised as high as it could go. She hunched over a keyboard, and had a weary look about her, as if she had been staring at the bright computer screen all day. She typed away at something for a moment before speaking again.

“I guess you know everything that’s been happening, or at least what your father told you.”

She glared at him. He only responded with a quiet, “Yeah.” His mother did not look satisfied with his answer.

“You’re staying here, not with him?”

Nopok nodded.

“Maybe you’d be better off with him. Don’t you think so?”

Nopok paused, not sure what to say, so he just said, “I don’t know” and waited for her inevitable negative response. She shook her head.

“I really think you should move in with him. You’re not going to be happy here.”

Nopok thought back to his conversations with Sammy, how they had both made an effort to reach each other, maybe for the first time since they were kids. Was it possible to do the same thing here? He had to try.

“I think I could be,” Nopok said.

His mother gave him a strange look, and then sighed. “Did your father tell you to say that, to encourage me?”

“No,” Nopok said. Before he could say more, or, rather, think of more to say, his mother interrupted.

“Now that he’s finally left, does he think keeping you close to me will let him control me?”

“That’s not-”

“Shut up,” she snapped. Her chair wobbled, and she put her feet on the floor to balance it. She sucked in a deep breath and stared, as if taking her eyes away from him would make her vulnerable somehow. Nopok wanted to walk out of the room.

“Listen, Jeff,” she said, putting emphasis on his name, “No one can ever hurt me again like your father did. Never again. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Nopok said. Her eyes screamed at him to stay in line, to keep perfectly still and say exactly what she expected. He felt helpless. His knees trembled at just the tone in her voice.

This was his mother at her most serious, raging with a spirit that could dig all the way to a person’s core.

“I don’t know why you want to stay here, but if you’re here to spy on me for your father, I will kick you out before you can get a car. I will put you out on the street. Do you understand me?”

There was a chilling silence in the room as Nopok hesitated. She glared at him, and he shot back, “I understand.”

His mother nodded her head and clasped her hands together. “It’s time for you to grow up. Your father’s not here, and you’re going to have to work to make up for it.”

She paused, but cut Nopok off before he could speak. “You’ll contribute to chores, first of all. And if you want Internet privileges, you’ll help pay for it—or convince your father to chip in for you.”

Nopok winced, wondering if it was even worth asking his father for help.

“As for your car,” his mother continued, “you and Sammy will have to work something out. I can’t help you pay for it. Talk to your father—if he even cares anymore.”

She paused, wearing a look of anger so deep that Nopok turned away to avoid drawing any attention. Finally, she continued, “So, those are your conditions for staying here. Will you accept them?”

Nopok nodded. “Yeah.” There was a pause. “I will,” he added.

Nopok’s mother stared at him, as if searching for something on his expression, and then said, “What are you thinking right now? Are you angry with me?”

“No,” Nopok said.

“Do you think I’m asking too much?”

“No,” Nopok said. His mother nodded.

“That’s right. The house is mine now. Your father gave up any claim on it when he left.”

Nopok said nothing. It seemed that she had more to say, but his mother struggled to find the words. His lack of a response seemed to unsettle her.

“Your father is giving up on you, too. Ask him for help and see what he doles out. Then you’ll know what it feels like.”

She studied Nopok. He tried not to show any expression at all.

“What do you think about that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Nopok said. She scowled at him, but seemed to hold back as she spoke.

“Go.”

He did not wait to as he was told.

* * *

In the morning, Sammy and Nopok ate breakfast together at the kitchen table, something they had not done in years. Sammy had gotten up early and made omelets, stir-frying green peppers and onions in a skillet and adding cheddar to the eggs as they cooked.

“I didn’t know you cooked,” Nopok said, remembering how his brother had substituted Slim Fast for breakfast during his freshmen and sophomore years. Sammy was a senior now, and Nopok did not even know what he ate for breakfast.

“I started last year,” Sammy said. “Most days, I get home pretty early every day, so I got used to cooking for myself.”

“I didn’t know,” Nopok said. His brother smiled. He was obviously not surprised.

“I’m here more than anyone,” Sammy said. “I could get around this house blind-folded if I wanted.”

“What about your job?” Nopok asked. “I thought you worked at least until I got home from school every day.”

“My hours got cut this year,” Sammy said. “They don’t appreciate me there.”

“I thought you were getting a manager position,” Nopok said. Sammy shook his head.

“That’s just something I told dad to get him off my back.” There was an awkward pause. Sammy went back into the kitchen before they could continue, and then cleaned until Nopok was ready to leave the house.

At least Sammy was telling the truth now about how he lived. That was a start. Nopok wondered how much more there would be to unravel. How much had his family's lives together been a show?

Nopok and his brother were both mostly silent during the ride to school, though Nopok did ask Sammy about why they were listening to a California radio station during the trip.

"California public radio is just better than the local NPR," Sammy said.

"What's the difference?" Nopok asked. His brother smiled.

"They play the news all day, and they have specialized shows on the arts in the afternoon. Local radio is just the same classical music CDs day after day."

Nopok nodded and smiled. Sammy seemed to enjoy explaining himself. It reminded Nopok of their father, who never passed up an opportunity to show off his thoughts on any given subject.

Of course, Sammy would have hated hearing about that similarity, so Nopok decided not to mention it.

Eventually, Sammy pulled up across the street from the university political science building and said, "Call me when you get out of work." Nopok assured him that he would, and Sammy added, "If you want to go to the hobby store later, I'm game."

Nopok told his brother that he would enjoy that. Sammy waved goodbye and drove off, leaving Nopok to think about how different their morning commute seemed now.

They were being nice to each other, even making plans about what to do later. Sammy's good mood was infectious, and Nopok had wanted to say more to him, at least something more enthusiastic when asked about doing something later. However, Nopok could not stop thinking about the past, how often he and Sammy had simply ignored each other or, worse, antagonized

each other in front of their parents. Maybe Sammy was just better at moving past those memories, or maybe he didn't dwell on them like Nopok did.

In any case, Nopok envied his ability to be so cheerful after their family had essentially broken apart. He wondered how he would explain everything to his father later. Or *would* he even explain things to his father? Nothing was certain anymore. Something about that was frightening.

Nopok walked to Professor Walters's classroom trying not to think about the public humiliation that his teacher had subjected him to on Wednesday, but once he saw the political science building, it hit him, along with a profound sense of dread.

What would he even say once he entered? There was no way that Professor Walters would expect Nopok to turn in the written summary of the previous class's lecture, not when he had been kicked out of the room before the lecture could begin. He thought about skipping the class altogether. Professor Walters, after all, followed the university attendance policy, which allowed for two unexcused absences. Nopok had not missed a single class this semester, and even if the previous class counted as an absence, he could still use his two absences this week. Maybe then, he could come back next week ready to get back on track. However, that would also mean missing another written summary, and he typically had an easier time writing summaries on weekends than during the week. After thinking it over, he decided to enter into the classroom.

A few other students locked eyes with him immediately. The professor had not yet arrived, but everyone already had their printed summaries on their desks. Apparently, they had learned from Nopok's example. Nopok did his best not to stand out, but the students who sat closest to him did ask him if he was okay.

“Sorry about what happened,” the student to his right said. Nopok tried to remember his name. They had shared notes once or twice, but Nopok could not remember if he had even asked for his name.

“Yeah,” Nppok finally said.

“I thought you’d quit the class,” the student continued. “I mean, I think would if a teacher did that to me.”

Nopok shook his head. “It’s just too much trouble.”

“I get that,” the student said.

A few other students offered similar condolences, and Nopok thanked each of them. When Professor Walters entered the room, they all turned to attention, looking terrified as he took the podium.

The professor raised an eyebrow as he looked out at Nopok. “Well, Jeff, I’m glad to see you back. Hopefully you’re ready to learn today.”

“Yes sir,” Nopok said, habitually taking the same tone he usually reserved for his father.

Professor Walters nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned his attention to taking attendance. And with that, the class proceeded as normal. Nopok kept waiting for uncomfortable questions to be directed his way about the reading, but they never came. When everyone was dismissed, he walked up to the professor and apologized for what had happened on Wednesday.

Voicing the apology was easy—he had given his parents countless false apologies after they had unloaded on him. He had found that apologizing made things easier, even if he was in the right.

“Everyone makes mistakes,” Professor Walters told him, talking with a mixture of masculine confidence and rebuke. It reminded Nopok of his father, of how men spoke when

teaching a lesson to an inferior who had made a mistake and received a fitting correction.

“You’re at least learning not to make the same mistakes over and over again. I’m looking forward to your next summary.”

Nopok thanked his professor for the second chance and wished him a good weekend. On the way out, he thought about what he would have to do to change his major. Call or email his advisor, maybe, then figure out whether Professor Walters’s class would even count towards his degree.

Nopok felt a hollowness that had plagued him for most of his life. Once again, he was the one giving in. He was the one admitting all wrongdoing and smoothing everything over by letting other people in his life walk all over him. His parents had taught him to do that.

But his parents were not controlling his life anymore. They were broken, and he needed to move on. Changing his major, he decided, was one way to begin doing exactly that.

* * *

Nopok's boss, Sandy, met him inside of the computer lab. He was surprised to see her at the attendant's desk, using the computer he had gotten used to thinking of as his own. Just the sight of her at it reminded him that this was his work computer. He did not own it, and once he left the job, he would never again use it. She looked up at him and asked, "You okay, Jeff?"

Her question startled him, and he said, "Yeah, I'm fine." His tone was not reassuring. Luckily, Sandy's attention shot back to her screen too fast for her to notice.

"I'll get out of your way in a bit," she said. "Just updating a few things."

Nopok thought about what she could be doing for a moment, since IT services from another building usually handled updates, but he said nothing. After a moment, she stood up and made way for him to take the seat.

"Oh hey," she said on the way out, "can you stop by my office after you close up? I just want to touch base on a few things."

"Sure," he said, and without another word, she was gone, and he sat there trying not to get frustrated that now he would wonder what she wanted all day. Had he made a mistake? Was the department watching his browsing history? Would they find out about all the time he spent on forums?

It took everything Nopok had to push those thoughts out of his head as he got to work. After changing the printer paper and helping a student log in to their account, he took his position at the front desk and logged in. It was easy enough to navigate to the game forum—his fingers moved on autopilot—but when he got there he paused, his brain suddenly going blank.

He could not think about games. He found the *Final Fantasy IV* forum and browsed topics, but none of them caught his attention. Noises in the computer lab stole his attention: a dropped pencil, the rumbling of the printer shifting paper into the loader, a disc drive vibrating to the hum of a spinning DVD. He tried to focus, but somehow the act of focusing seemed to make his head even more foggy. Finally, he minimized his entire browser and closed his eyes.

What was he doing wrong? Normally, Nopok could escape his problems online. The RP had felt like such a magical place to be, and even the forum itself was a welcome distraction. He still loved the game itself. He had originally found Gamefaqs just to talk to other fans about the story and characters. But today, he was not feeling anything.

Maybe the situation at home had gotten to him, he thought. There had been so little time to decompress. He tried to tell himself that it was not that bad, that despite his mother's confrontational tone last night, she had neither kicked him out of the house nor really asked him to do anything unreasonable. Eventually, he was going to have to be more independent. He knew that. Getting a car would be a good first step.

That was it. The car. His parents had both relied on Sammy's income to help pay for it, and Sammy had dropped the bomb that he was not, in fact, making much money at his job. Neither of his parents knew about it, either, and Nopok did not feel like it was his right to tell them. So, he was mostly alone in knowing that there would not be a car, unless his father could help him afford one, which Nopok doubted. His father worked at a foundry. Nopok had barely worked enough to even know what paychecks looked like, but he knew that there was no way the foundry paid his father well enough for a car to be a possibility anytime soon. And yet, he knew that the car would be brought up. His mother would hang it over his head as the end goal of his time at the house. Nopok knew how that would go: they would all silently work towards the

dream of the car, none of them capable of determining if any real progress had been made towards it. At the end of each week, there would be meetings on the subject. His mother often turned dinner into a progress report. Sammy would pretend that he had money. Maybe he would throw out a number that his mother would not remember, and she would think everything was edging closer to her own dream: forcing Nopok and Sammy out of the house and out of her life. Although, he did wonder if she still wanted Sammy gone. She had seemed so intent on it before the breakup. There was no telling how she felt now. She would probably not share her feelings with him, and he doubted that he would understand her even if she tried.

He thought on the hopelessness of the situation for what felt like an hour, and then saw that only ten minutes had passed at most. Uncertainty, it seemed, made time stand still. Without thinking, Nopok brought up the forum again, casually reading through topics. Evo97 had posted a new thread about shipping the ninja character and the green-haired summoner as a romantic pairing. Two “help me with the boss” threads had sprung up from casual users, and one still did not have a response. Nopok opened the unanswered topic and read through the user’s cry for help. [*Can’t beat the demon wall, it keeps killing my party. What should I do?*] Nopok responded without thinking, going through the motions of explaining for what felt like the twentieth time how to slow down the boss down with spells and then pummel it with attacks. After hitting the reply button, he stopped and stared at his screen.

Had he hit an epiphany? There was still a hollowness inside of him after thinking about the car, but he did feel some energy, at least enough to post replies to questions. His knowledge of the game seemed so automatic now. He thought of his own memories running through the game, thundering past each encounter with an almost surgical level of skill. He had come to the forum without really knowing what to expect from it, and it had surprised him that so many

conversations on it involved explaining mechanics to people new to the game. Some of the veterans on the forum were sarcastic in their replies to newbies, but Nopok always tried to be genuine and earnest with them. Once, he had been bad at the game too. His parents bought him strategy guides written by gaming magazines, and he had studied those old booklets until the spines broke and the pages wore out. He wondered how many hours he had poured into *Final Fantasy* games over the years. Sometimes, he asked himself if all that time was worth it.

They had gotten him through middle school, through high school, through depression, through day after day in which both his parents worked until 7 pm, when his brother refused to talk to them thanks to their parents pitting them against each other. The games had been the closest thing he had to friends, and now, he was finding other people who loved them.

He navigated to the RP topic, checking the list of posts. Typhoon had posted a direct reply to Clair, while Luminous and Gizmos had gotten involved in Camarilla's entry into the game. Nopok smiled as he read over her post. He had forgotten the user's plan to play as a talking dog, and he was surprised to see her approach it directly, even seriously.

[Smells of food called Alexandra towards the group of people. Memories of past incidents with humans played out in her mind: a master who loved her and trained her before disappearing, people on the street who fought with her for scraps of food from the trash, and then the people who made her fight. They were wizards, and they beat her and experimented on her until she could speak and use magic. Alexandra had barely escaped from those people, and told herself that she would never again go back to humans for food. However, the cooking in the pot over the group's campfire smelled incredible. Alexandra crept into the bushes and observed the humans. Three of them, two men in metal clothes and a woman, smelled normal enough—no bad emotions or hostility—but one member of the group smelled of death. That odor reminded

her of the wizards. She edged forward, watching the composure of the humans. Even with the strange one's awful smell, they seemed friendly, and the meat's odor began to overpower her sense of caution. She walked forward, and when they began to look at her, she woofed, just to test them. If they reacted with hostility, she could retreat, maybe try to lunge forward and grab a piece of meat once they lowered their guards. But if they were friendly? It had been days since she had eaten anything more than insects and mice. Maybe today, she could get lucky. She advanced, ready to take a chance for the first time in too long.]

Nopok shook his head as he finished. Camarilla had actually decided to go through with it, playing a talking dog. And she had taken it seriously. Luminous's reply as Scott featured him breaking off a debate with Void to take notice of the dog. A memory about a childhood dog came to him, and he offered the dog a piece of food.

Void's response was simple. "Don't like dogs, not usually." Hardly charming, but Gizmos was playing to the character, or so Nopok figured. Camarilla took the cue and had Alexandra growl at Void before carefully taking a scrap of food from Scott.

Nopok took a deep breath. He was smiling, despite the feeling of emptiness still throbbing within him like a fever. It reminded him of playing games at the end of long days in high school. He would come home full of hatred and loathing of school, and then pump his emotions into an RPG. On the worst days, he played a bitter character, someone who was not afraid to hurt others to get what they wanted. It was usually a girl, if the game allowed the player to choose a gender. Her personality would come from how Nopok made choices presented to the player during the game's story. Maybe there were non-player characters begging for their lives, or opportunities to steal from shopkeepers. One of the oldest RPG games, *Dragon Warrior*, had even given Nopok the chance to side with the evil sorcerer threatening the world. So many of

those games had been power fantasies, a genre that made Nopok feel like he had real control over a world. Gaming journalists had defined the term multiple times, even criticizing games that fit the mold.

Maybe those journalists never felt helpless, like Nopok did every day. Maybe they had more to live their life by than threats that would never be carried out, or promises undermined before anyone could even think of fulfilling them.

For Nopok, there was joy in playing a character who could affect the world around them, partially because no matter what he did, he could not change the people who still controlled his life.

He paused, still feeling stress, or perhaps letting himself finally feel the stress that had been building up ever since his father left, but part of him still wanted to smile. Even when he was feeling bad, he could enjoy a game like the RP. He had thought of it as just a power fantasy, a game where he could make a character and have her save the world, perform feats of power that no real person could ever manage, and throw out emotions in a dramatic, unrealistic way. Maybe he could still do some of those things, but he was beginning to realize that the tone would be different this time. This was more than just playing the heroic foil to a video game story: Clair was one member of an ensemble cast, which now included a talking dog.

He began to read over Typhoon's post. Gideon, stoic knight that he was, reassured Clair that journeying with him was the right place to be. "Who knows," he said as they watched Alexandra take the meat from Scott and return to the bushes to eat. "I like to think that maybe we all met each other for a reason."

[*"I hope that's true,"*] Nopok began with his reply. [*Clair gave Gideon an earnest look. She was hesitant to say any more—no one in her past had been supportive of her feelings. She*

was always a pawn in someone else's games, a favorite toy that her master had used to hurt his rivals. Leaving him had put her on the path to freedom, and ever since then, she had been wondering what to do with that freedom. Now, she was beginning to feel that she had found her place. "I need some meaning in my life right now, and even though I don't know you that well yet, Gideon, I feel that maybe you're right." Clair advanced towards the dog, holding up her hands. In the assassin's guild, she had been around many dogs. Oftentimes, she had been their friend. She carefully took a piece of meat from the pot and offered it to the dog. "Come here, girl. That's it. You're in the right place, now. I...I feel like I am too."}]

* * *

Before Nopok's shift ended, Typhoon got in a short reply in which he had Gideon echo Clair's welcoming gesture towards Camarilla's character. Reading the sequence again and again, Nopok found that it was funny how a dog walking onto the scene had completely disarmed the group. They had all seemed so brooding before, airing out tragic backstories and reservations about moving forward, but once a hungry dog showed up, they were all eager to please—even the vampire, who seemed to like Alexandra despite repeating three times that he wasn't a dog person.

As the last students left the lab, Nopok copied the words from each post and put them into the Word document that he had used to record the RP topic. It was one of his oldest Internet habits, jotting down every online conversation that he had on every website. It had been at least ten years since he started, but he could remember when the idea was planted in his head. His father, one day, had cursed out loud when he had accidentally deleted an email chain with his mother. Nopok had been ten years old, and when he asked his father what happened, his father showed him his email server and explained how sometimes very important words on the Internet could just disappear with no trace left behind. His father had compared it to burning letters, and had stressed to Nopok how easy it was for words to be forgotten. "If something's important to you, son, write it down. Save it. Sometimes you forget, and sometimes you just lose them, but there are things in life that you can't ever get back if you lose them."

Nopok had taken the lesson to heart, and for years, he carried a Steno pad around to jot down notes anytime something important happened in his life. When he dived into his online life,

he had taken the same attitude with him, copying text conversations, comments, and forum posts onto Notepad files. He grouped them in folders on a flash drive, and backed up everything on his desktop. There was a folder for every website, and even subfolders to organize documents by topic. Recently, he had gotten the idea of adding more organization by separating everything into designated yearly folders. One day, he thought, his desktop would be a scrapbook of all the important moments of his online life.

Despite his efforts, though, there were still things that he had lost, older websites that stopped working. One contained a trove of files ranging from game save files to source code to cheats for in-game use. Everything had been lost after a big corporation shut it down for copyright infringement. Another site had never been renewed by its owner and had become a Japanese postpartum support website. Nopok had kept the link and sometimes still checked it, just to make sure that the site was lost. The change shocked him, as did every instance of losing places he had visited, especially ones where he had posted in forums or comments sections. It felt like losing a part of himself, and in a way that he was powerless to prevent. Once, he had thought about joining Internet petitions to fight against the loss of online history, but the actual effort of keeping up with those movements had been too much for him.

Maybe his parents had been right about his major. Maybe politics was wrong for him, and screwing up with Professor Walters had just been the natural progression of things.

He tried not to think about class as he logged off his work computer and walked out of the lab. Sandy waved to him from the hallway. She had expected him to forget about their meeting, probably. If so, she had been right.

“Jeff, hey,” she began, sounding casual enough, but her tone changed as she continued, “do you have a minute?”

His heart dropped. Had something happened? “Sure.”

Wordlessly, she led him up to the office. As he followed, he couldn't help but feel exhausted from not knowing what to expect yet again. This was just how it always was with bosses, it seemed, even a nice one like Sandy. Maybe he put too much value into the authority they had over him. He had tried to tell himself that this was just a part time job, not something to be too afraid of screwing up. But then, his parents' voices were still in his head telling him how important money was to everything in his life. He wanted to think that they had had good intentions—this was America, after all, a country driven by money—but the resulting pressure had just made him worse at his job. He had a horrible thought that that same pressure would follow him to every job. He wondered if there was any way he could drive it out. He was still wondering as Sandy took him aside in the main office, close to the lost-and-found boxes, where the other secretary could not hear them well.

“Have you heard about what happened on campus today?” Sandy said in a grave voice.

Nopok paused. “No, I haven't heard about anything.”

There was a look in Sandy's eyes that Nopok did not understand, a look of fear or dread.

“There was a bomb threat today in the admin building.”

Nopok froze, feeling a limp emptiness build up within him as he struggled to make sense of her words. He started to repeat her words, but stopped himself, feeling that something as serious as “bomb threat” was too dangerous to repeat.

It felt unreal. This was Memphis. Why would anyone make threats against a university in Memphis?

“Nobody got hurt,” Sandy said, “and turns out, there wasn't a bomb at all, but the campus police got involved, and IT thinks there might have been a breach in the network.”

She paused to give Nopok a moment. He nodded and just said, “Okay.”

“It is okay,” Sandy said. “Everything’s okay. It’s all over, and we didn’t raise a panic over it. But IT is still concerned about security, so we’re about to mandate that all university passwords get changed by the end of next week. I just wanted to give you and the other lab attendants in the humanities buildings a heads up. You might want to change your password now, and I’d say change your personal passwords too, anything you might have used while on campus.”

Nopok took in a deep breath. What could he even say, other than the obvious?

“Okay. Yeah, I will.”

After more reassurance that everything would be fine, and that campus security and the Memphis Police Department had everything under control, Sandy let Nopok go. He walked around campus, empty inside, his mind spinning on gears trying to wrap his head around the idea that a real danger had happened today, something deadly serious, and he had not even known about it until after it was over. Wild thoughts came to him, images of buildings exploding, cartoonish faces of the hackers who had tried to infiltrate the university systems. It felt like a Hollywood action movie plot, something that people like Nopok would never get involved with. He wasn’t sure if it was right to be frightened or just stunned. Deep down, he barely felt anything. It was too difficult to feel at a gut level.

By the time Sammy arrived to pick him up, Nopok was more worried about the chance that his password on the gaming forum had been compromised than he was about any explosive, real or imagined.

* * *

Sammy did not ask Nopok how his day had been, and Nopok did not feel like explaining the incident with the bomb threat, at least not in the car. After some small talk, Nopok expected another conversation about Sammy's job, but his brother surprised him. Instead, they spent the ride talking about Youtube videos that Sammy had watched on his phone throughout the day.

"You've got to watch Jingle Cats after we get home," Sammy said. "It's the funniest shit."

After the drive, Nopok and his brother went upstairs to his room and spent an hour watching Youtube videos on Nopok's laptop. Several times, Nopok felt the urge to drift away, if only to log onto the gaming forum and see if anyone had replied to his post, but Sammy looked happier than Nopok had seen him in a long time. He wanted to enjoy hanging out with his brother, but he could not help but feel tense as they watched the videos together. If Sammy laughed, he laughed along with him. It was hard to dispel the thought that any mistake on his part, any random awkward moment, could kill the entire experience for both of them. Nopok had made so many mistakes over the years with Sammy, and his brother had done the same. He wanted to think that if they spent time together enough, it was possible to mend the rift that had formed between them. However, once again Nopok had to get over himself. His anxiety, he knew, could destroy everything. He just needed to hide it, but that was never easy.

At one point, after laughing at a video called a Youtube Poop, Sammy stopped and asked Nopok if everything was okay. Nopok tried to reply that it was, but he paused, and Sammy saw the hesitation. He knew. Nopok could see it on his expression.

“I don’t know how you feel about things,” Sammy said, his voice timid. “About dad leaving, I mean. But for me, now that he’s gone, I feel like I can finally...unwind, you know?”

Nopok did not know what to say.

“Sorry I brought it up,” Sammy said quickly.

“No,” Nopok said. “You’re right. Things were kind of tense before he left.”

“Tell me about it,” Sammy said. He closed the window on the computer, maybe to avoid distractions. He clearly had something he wanted to say, and it took him a moment to put it together. “You ever wonder what things might have been like if he had left when we were kids?”

There was a pause. “I don’t know,” Nopok finally said. It felt like the neutral response. Safe. From Sammy’s tone, he could tell that his brother had not wanted safe.

“Yeah, I know,” Sammy said. “I guess there’s no point in thinking about what might have happened. We can’t change what they did to us.”

Nopok said nothing, and Sammy pressed his hand against the keyboard. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Sammy stood up and began to walk out of the room.

“Wait,” Nopok said, his mind racing for a way to salvage what had happened.

Maybe he had misread Sammy, or maybe what Sammy had felt was not so different than his own thoughts about hanging out.

Sammy stopped in the doorway. His gaze was piercing. Suddenly, Nopok had a moment in which he was expected to say something significant, something honest and reassuring. For so many years, ambivalence had been the norm between them. If their parents were around, they became hostile. Nopok had hated his brother for never defending him in front of their parents, or worse: making fun of him to please their mother. He was sure that Sammy resented Nopok

running to their father whenever they had problems with each other. Now that the situation with their parents had deteriorated, Nopok and Sammy had time to drop all pretenses and be real with each other, maybe for the first time in their lives.

Was it any surprise that neither of them had any idea how to make it work?

“I just wanted to say I had a good time,” Nopok said, giving voice to the first thing that came to mind. “Let’s hang out more.”

“Yeah,” Sammy said, not sounding inspired.

“I mean it,” Nopok continued, “all that stuff with mom and dad, we don’t have to let it get to us.”

“You’re right,” Sammy said. “I’ll try to work on it.”

* * *

By the time Nopok went to the forum, it was 8 pm. Typhoon had decided to move the RP topic forward, and his post came at an awkward time, cutting off Camarilla's response to everyone's friendliness.

[*"I certainly hope you humans are better than my last furless friends,"*] Camarilla began, casually throwing in the idea that this dog could talk. No one replied within the hour, and then Typhoon posted.

In terms of drama, Nopok liked to think that no one in the group quite knew how to respond to the dog. Then again, this was a world where magic and monsters existed. A talking dog, realistically speaking, was probably mundane to people who lived with magic.

Typhoon's post moved the story forward into the morning, and saw Gideon lead the group north for several miles, until they could see the mouth of the dreaded Cavern of Mist.

[*"This place," Gideon said, "was where the previous war really took off. A guardian beast once stalked the cavern, warding off any invaders, but a dark knight and his dragoon friend slew it. The guardian died, and the place it defended, the village of Mist, was burned to the ground."* Gideon paused, reflecting on the solemnity of the occasion. *He had never gone this far north or taken the cavern before, and he had heard that it was haunted. "A place with this much history feels intimidating somehow."*]

Gizmos provided the first reply, and Nopok had to admit: it was hilarious.

[*What was the plot again?*] Gizmos said, out of character. [*I'm sorry. I've had a bad day.*]

Nopok smiled and noted to himself that the old posts were just a few scrolls up from Typhoon's post. If Gizmos wanted to know the plot, he could have read the posts again for himself.

Luminous, however, had come in and done Typhoon the favor of providing a quick summary through Scott's dialogue.

["I know the feeling," Scott says, keeping his hand on his sword as he stares down at the mouth of the cave. "To think there are new guardians here, and that once again evildoers from the Kingdom of Baron seek to destroy them. If there are ghosts, I wonder what they think about history repeating itself. Would they laugh at us in our foolishness, or cry?"]

Nopok took his turn replying next, after thinking through Clair's reply. It felt hard jumping back into Clair's head again. So much had happened at home, and even though he felt stable tonight, he knew that Saturday would be awkward. He would be home all day. What if his father wanted to spend time with him? Or, worse, what if his mother wanted him to do chores?

Being Clair again was a welcome distraction from reality.

["I think they would want us to move on," Clair says, trying not to think about her own past. "We don't have to let the past control who we are or what we do. Right now, all we can do is go forward. So, let's stop talking and move." Clair steps forward, advancing past the others in the group and taking her first steps into the Cavern of Mist. She does not fear what lies within, or at least tells herself that she is not afraid. The past haunts her, maybe it always will, but she has decided to live in the present, to accept who she is for the first time. She takes in a deep breath, shaking off one last fit of fear before drawing her kukri. "It begins," she whispers to herself. Not an adventure to save the world; she did not have Gideon's nobility. No, this was an adventure to save herself.]

* * *

Before going downstairs, Nopok logged his recording of the day's new RP posts in a Word document and uploaded it to his One Drive. His mother did not call for anyone, so he took an extra moment just to make sure his files were sorted. It was not easy archiving a forum, but it felt satisfying to have everything recorded, everything saved. *Just like saving in a video game*, he thought. The routine eased his mind. Many times, he wished he could do the same thing in real life: make a save, try out something, and then reload if life sucked. Try again. Repeat.

Instead, the terrible moments in life just built up. He thought of them whenever even the slightest thing went wrong anymore. Because of that, it was easier just to think about other things in his free time: games, forum activities, the RP—anything. Maybe life would get easier one day, though if his parents' lives were any indication, that kind of forward progression was rare. People in real life did not level up and get stronger. They survived, with each day chipping away something new from the block of who you were.

For dinner, Nopok ate refrigerated leftovers. There was no family meal, no prayer at the dinner table. Sammy grabbed his half of the leftovers, and their mother microwaved one of the frozen meals she had bought for lunch at work. Everyone shuffled off to their own room and kept their doors closed.

For Nopok, it was peace. He could focus on the RP, uninhibited. He brought up his laptop, but stopped for a while to let Windows update. His home computer, an old Dell laptop his parents had bought him as a high school graduation present, was showing its age. The whirring from the insides suggested that the hard drive could barely handle basic processes anymore. It

struggled to even play Youtube videos without stuttering, though something like the gaming forum gave it no trouble—aside from the occasional video ad that managed to bypass Nopok’s redundant Adblocker programs. Somebody, it seemed, was always finding a way to make his online life more difficult.

Gamefaqs, at a glance, had done a seasonal update for their site. Their banner displayed cartoon pumpkins and ghosts, while a small “news” tab advertised new downloadable content for mobile games. Nopok did his best to avoid mobile games, as most of them pushed expensive in-app purchases, in what was essentially unregulated gambling. He had wasted hundreds of his parents’ dollars in high school before cutting himself off from more modern games. Retro games, like *Final Fantasy*, had given him a safer outlet for his free time, although sometimes he felt old-fashioned for playing games that were older than he was. At least sites like Gamefaqs were welcoming of the retro crowd. If he had not found a community on gaming sites, Nopok would have grown up without any sense of community at all. His parents never invited work friends home. Their focus was on immediate family. His father, more than once, had even told him not to trust people outside the family.

Nopok had never known why his father kept people at a distance. His father’s reluctance to open up about his life, at least in any way other than superficial macho swaggering, made him a mystery to his family. Sometimes, Nopok wondered whether other people’s parents stayed so aloof. Was hiding who you were a generational thing, or just a sad reality of American life? Nopok felt too disconnected from society to even try to answer that question. He kept his focus small, on the immediate.

Right now, he had maybe an hour or two to relax and to engage with his own community. He closed his eyes and tried to picture all the characters in the RP: noble Gideon and Scott, with

perfect hair and sterling armor; the vampiric Void, who probably went for a Victorian goth look (with some Hot Topic spliced in for good measure); Alexandra, a shaggy golden dog with too-intelligent eyes and a sharp voice; and then Clair, with her messy black hair, tight black robe, multiple belts (as per usual for *Final Fantasy* designs), and well-worn dagger holsters. These were his people. His crew. And he could be Clair here. She was openly troubled, but doing her best to move forward. She was unkempt, but still had enough self-esteem to walk with knights. She was anxious, but willing to dive into the unknown. These were all things Nopok wished for himself. For the last few nights in a row, he had gone to sleep wishing he could wake up as Clair; not just look like her, but *be* her.

It felt like wishing was all he could do, day after day. The world around him applied unbelievable pressure to fit into place, to not add any more conflict to the disasters happening to everyone else in his life. There was simply no time for Nopok's problems. If provoked, his mother could kick him out. Then, there was no telling if his father would take him in. Nopok had not even seen where his father was living. No, for now, he needed to be boring, predictable Jeff in the real world, the young man who never spoke up, the boy who had grown up silent and alone. The boy who wished he could be Clair.

He navigated to the *Final Fantasy IV* forum, already thinking that he should add more physical description into his next post, just to remind everyone what Clair looked like. The list of topics came up. He eyed a few game help topics, and then looked around the top of the screen. The RP topic was not there.

Nopok froze. Other topics from the previous day were still there, including Evo's goofy shipping post. He clicked the option to move to page two and read the next list of topics. Again, the RP topic was gone.

He scrolled through every page of the forum, from page 1 to page 120. Nothing. He closed his eyes, forced a deep breath.

“It’s okay,” he whispered to himself. Most often, he did this when things were not in fact okay.

He checked his messages. There was a single message from Typhoon, which was titled, “They shut us down.”

Nopok paced his room silently, nerves alight, before finally reading it.

[As you may have noticed, the RP topic is gone. Unless someone backed it up, it’s gone forever. I’m going to ask the mods what happened, but I know they’re going to say it was “off-topic.” I just wanted to let everyone know and apologize. I’m sorry. Life sucks right now, and I don’t know what to do here.]

Nopok cursed so loud that he heard doors opening downstairs.

* * *

Nopok lied in his bed for the longest time, mulling over Typhoon's comment that it was over.

Around midnight, his room was still. Wind blew against the tree outside his room. Branches raked the siding of the house. On his phone, Nopok scrolled through bookmarks, visiting random sites he had decided were important over the years. An old post displayed the last Facebook post he had read before leaving the site. A Youtube link brought him to a "removed for copyright violation" message.

The RP was over. What had he thought it was going to be? Even before Nopok joined, Gamefaqs had been notorious for deleting off-topic posts, and the moderators and admins had only gotten stricter about the policy in recent years. Not that Nopok could usually blame him—online trolls were scum, plain and simple. The gamer community was so toxic that Gamefaqs was the gaming-oriented site that Nopok could even stand.

It was funny how good things died so quickly online. This time, it had ended as it had truly gotten started. Somehow, he had thought that after years on Gamefaqs, something would go deeper than random help topics about the game.

No: what really upset him is that he had wanted Clair to go farther, for her to have more of a life than a handful of posts. It felt like a part of him had died suddenly, and that the stillness all around him was the emptiness of his life settling in like a creeping horror.

What did he have to look forward to tomorrow, or the day after that? His parents would have plans for him, expectations. They would expect him to make his job work, to make his

major work too. None of those things felt like they were on a promising track. In fact, nothing in his life had felt promising outside of his online life.

Maybe there was Sammy. And the fact that his mother had not kicked him out. It was hard, however, to see those things as anything more than a wound that was slowly healing.

His family had not put him on a path to success. He had certainly not found the way himself, and it was hard to imagine that a major in political science would get him there. Would he run for office? Or maybe join a partisan think tank? Just thinking about politics made him angry. Since Covid, politics had been as toxic as fan communities online. The world was burning, inside and out, and Nopok felt that he had no place in it. No, he did not want a place in it.

He rolled over in his bed. His phone buzzed. The screen illuminated with a single text from his father.

We need to meet up tomorrow morning. There's a lot we need to talk about.

"Great," Nopok mumbled, pushing his pillow over his eyes. "More life stuff to look forward to."

Nopok laid awake for another hour, his mind racing for ways to save his online life, at least when he was not dreading what his father had in store for him.

Then, at what must have been close to 1:30 am, an idea jolted him wide awake. He fumbled his way to his computer, still in his sleep shorts, and found his way back to Gamefaqs. He highlighted Typhoon's direct message, then began typing his reply.

[I have everything recorded. I copy it all into a doc file. And I think I know a place where we can go.]

He did not wait for a reply (it would be foolish to expect one so late), but he could relax in his bed, knowing that there was at least something he could try. There was no telling if it would work, but there was a chance now—a chance for Clair, and a chance for himself.

* * *

Nopok's father texted again at 8:20 in the morning. "Meet me outside." Nopok's mother gave him permission to go (he felt the need to ask), but she also added a warning.

"Just remember: he didn't take you with him when he left. He didn't want you."

Nopok just nodded, and then walked past the dining room, where Sammy just gave him a disappointed look. Nopok wondered if Sammy saw this meeting as a betrayal. Sammy had, after all, tried to encourage Nopok to move on from his father. Nopok had a lot of mixed feelings about his father, but his father was still supportive. Nopok was afraid of cutting anyone off at this point. How could he? His mother tolerated him now, but his father had been a part of that, and there was no guaranteeing that anything would stay stable. His father was a plan B. Nopok needed to keep it that way.

His father's Toyota Camry pulled up in front of the house. Nopok joined his father in the car without a word. The interior, it seemed, had been cleaned, and the usual plastic bags, McDonalds drink containers, and old food boxes were all missing. A smell of lemon and chemicals drew Nopok's attention to the air freshener hanging by the rear-view mirror.

"Wow," Nopok said, unable to help him. "You really cleaned up."

"That was Tom," his father said. "He doesn't like messes."

There was a pause, as if invoking Tom's name in person had changed something between them.

“Has he been in your car before?” Nopok said, wanting to ask questions but not to be too direct. He realized that his question sounded awkward, but his father answered before he could add anything.

“Not in a long time,” his father said. “We take his car, normally.”

Nopok considered asking what “normally” even meant, but his father seemed to recognize the vagueness in his words and saved his son the trouble.

“When we meet downtown, I mean. Tom’s got a nice car, not like this wreck.”

The tone in Nopok’s father words near the end became aggressive—maybe towards the family, or perhaps just in an outpouring of emotions. Nopok’s family had struggled with money his entire life. He wondered if Tom had similar difficulty, or even how Tom factored into his father’s life, specifically.

He decided to keep asking questions. “So, what do you and Tom do downtown, normally?”

Nopok sounded hesitant, not wanting to be too provocative. His father took a moment to think. It was not like him to have so much trouble summoning the right words. Then again, he and Nopok had never exactly had a conversation like this before. It felt new. Frightening.

Nopok wondered how much time they would spend together today, and how much of it would be awkward like this.

Rather than answer, his father pulled into a gas station. “You know how to fill it up?” he asked.

Nopok grimaced. “Yes,” he said. “I know how to pump gas.” His father raised an eyebrow. They exchanged a moment, neither saying anything, if they even knew what to say. Normally, Nopok’s father would give him his credit card, but that had not yet happened. This

was a cue, obviously, that Nopok would pay for the gas. He wondered how much money he had left in his debit account. Would it even cover twenty dollars in gas?

“I’ll pay,” Nopok said, betting on optimism. His father watched him exit the car, and then pulled out his cell phone, which had a new black guard case. Another gift from Tom?

Nopok got out of the car and ran his card through the pump. It authorized the purchase, so that was a good sign. He looked to his father and saw that he was being watched.

Years ago, his father had made forcing Nopok to pump the gas every time a policy between them. At first, he had wanted to teach Nopok how to take care of a car, “so you know how to do it on your own one day,” as he put it. Years of the routine, though, had turned these learning moments into something absurd. Nopok felt that no matter how many times he proved he could do something, it was never enough for his parents.

As he pumped, Nopok turned and stared at his dad, who did not maintain eye contact. Instead, he focused on his phone, typing away at text messages. Nopok’s father seemed nervous, and it was hard to know why. Maybe this routine was getting old for him too.

After pumping the gas, Nopok returned to the passenger seat, and his father took them on a road north of Bartlett.

“Where are we going?” Nopok asked. It felt strange to him that the subject had not even been mentioned yet.

His father hesitated before answering.

“I want you to meet Tom. So, we’re going to his place.”

Nopok froze. His father’s tone, now more anxious than Nopok had ever heard before, threw him off balance.

His father scratched his neck. Nopok let out a slow sigh. The smell of passing roadkill entered the car, and Nopok's father let out an audible reaction before turning up the air conditioning. They looked to each other, reacting to the smell, and Nopok's father smiled.

"That was bad," he said.

"Yeah," Nopok said. He couldn't help but smile too.

They drove another minute, and his father said, "Tom's looking forward to this, you know. He's been looking forward to it...for a long time."

A moment passed. "How long have you known Tom, again?" Nopok asked.

"Since high school," his father said. "We were best friends."

Nopok's father shifted in his seat, adjusted the air conditioning back to normal, and then drove until hitting an interstate ramp.

"And you're still best friends?" Nopok asked. It seemed like the best way of putting the question to his father without asking it directly: what does Tom mean to you? Nopok hated that he did not have the courage to just voice the words he wanted to use.

"We're...we're just a little more than that now," his father said, and that was all he would say on the matter until they reached Tom's house.

* * *

The house itself was typical southern fare, a two-story “McMansion” nestled within its own tiny section of forest outside of Millington, neighbored by soy bean and corn fields. The property looked old, housing a worn-out barn and countless pieces of rusted-over yard equipment, but the true crowning touch was the blue sedan, probably an 80s model by the looks of it, parked in the yard beside the driveway.

Tom was standing on the porch beside a painted wooden swing (a porch swing, God, how southern could you be). Appearance-wise, he looked unremarkable to Nopok from the car—brown khaki pants, a navy-blue polo shirt, wide glasses with metal frames, and a round, nice-guy face. He could have been any random middle-class man from the Millington area, someone you might meet on a golf course or perusing the salad dressing section of a Kroger. Nopok, though, knew better than to judge someone based on their looks, at least in the sense that he hoped others would not criticize his own appearance.

Nopok’s father parked in the driveway. Tom seemed to begin to walk off the porch, and then stopped. Nopok could feel an instant tension, as if no one had rehearsed this moment in their heads. His father unlocked the car, but took the longest time before opening his door, and then, only after opening it, he turned to Nopok and said, “Come on.”

Nopok felt that more needed to be said, at least something in the way of an introduction, or an explanation of what he could expect. But it was too late. He followed his father out of the car, and Tom stepped off of the porch, hands stuffed in his pockets. Up close, he looked friendly, but nervous, with a face that reminded Nopok of other aging Gen-Xers.

“Hey,” Tom said in a voice that was nerdier and more nasal than Nopok had expected. His father walked up to Tom and hugged him. Tom looked surprised, but then embraced him back.

So, it was like that, Nopok thought. Wild thoughts raced through his head about his father’s life. Was this the place where he went to be happy?

Somehow, the thought that his father had a secret place escape to made him feel more relatable. And certainly, there was something different about Nopok’s father. Nopok had never seen him walk up to and embrace his mother like that.

It was nice, Nopok told himself, to see this, even though part of him still felt ashamed that his father had kept this from him for so long. But then again, didn’t Nopok keep things from his parents so routinely that he never even thought about it anymore? Wasn’t that just habit at this point, to hide parts of his life from others in order to be happy?

He wondered what his father would think if he were to show him his online life, his username Nopok, and all the places where he had posted over the years. What would Nopok’s father think of Clair, or the feelings he had when role playing as her? Hopefully, Nopok would be able to experience those feelings again. Even as he walked up to Tom, keeping his guard up but hoping for the best, Nopok thought about how he was going to save the RP and that part of his life. He would have to work hard to build something new, out of sight of the admins—just as he was building something new with his father.

“Well,” Nopok’s father said, “I think I need to use the restroom. Why don’t you two, uh, catch up for a bit?”

Even Tom frowned at that, but said nothing as Nopok’s father entered the house.

Tom gave Nopok a shrug, and then extended his hand.

“Hey, Jeff. I’m Tom.”

Nopok accepted the handshake. Tom’s hand was sweaty.

“Yeah, nice to meet you.”

Tom hesitated, then asked, “Did you father tell you anything about us?”

“Not a lot,” Nopok said. He took a few steps, just to move. Anything to keep himself from panicking.

He forgot how difficult it was for him to talk to new people in his life. Usually, he would just avoid them, but that was not an option here.

“Yeah,” Tom sounds. “That’s your father.” Tom walked closer to the bench, and then continued, “Actually, I’ve been wanting to meet you for a long time.”

“How long?” Nopok asked, wanting to keep things moving. Conversations, in her experience, could end if he stayed too quiet. Yet another bad habit of his.

“It feels like a lifetime,” Tom said. “Actually, more than that: a lifetime and two pandemics.”

“Wow,” Nopok said, immediately regretting how awkward it sounded. Tom took a seat on the porch swing and did not react.

“So your dad hasn’t told you anything about me?”

“No,” Nopok said.

“How about before he left your mom’s? Did he ever say my name to anyone?”

Nopok shook his head. “Dad’s never mentioned you before, not before all this stuff happened.”

“Yeah,” Tom said with a sad grin. “Does he ever talk about his friends? At all?”

Nopok froze, trying to think. “I don’t think so.”

Tom nodded. “That’s something you learn about your dad. He’s a master of keeping different parts of his life separate from each other.”

“I guess so,” Nopok said. He looked around, trying to find his own spot. Tom saw and offered a place on the swing.

Nopok was just a bit embarrassed by how much the swing strained as he sat down on it.

“Then let me tell you a bit about us,” Tom said. He had the voice of a storyteller. “Your dad and I met a long time ago. Actually, we were best friends.”

“He told me that,” Nopok said. Tom looked at him, and Nopok felt the need to apologize. “Sorry.”

Tom smiled. “Did he tell that we planned on moving to California together?”

“No,” Nopok said, not sure how to react. He tried to imagine a younger version of his father, secretly planning to escape the south. Nopok had certainly had the same dream many times in his life.

“That was the plan, back in college. We even had a neighborhood in mind in San Diego. After we graduated, it was going to be the first thing we did together. I mean together. But then his parents found out. Did you know your grandparents on your father’s side?”

“Not well,” Nopok said. “Dad kept us away from them, and Mom hated them.”

“I’m not surprised,” Tom said. “Your grandparents cracked down on your dad hard after he graduated. They cut off all support unless he could get a job, and without that support, he couldn’t save money. So, he got a job, and that took up all of his time. He didn’t adjust well, you know? He got into the habit of going to bars every day. We both did.”

There was a pause. Nopok rushed to think of a question, any question. “Where do you work?”

It did not feel natural, but Tom replied anyway. “I’m a commissary worker at the Naval base. Twenty years, now, actually.”

“Neat,” Nopok said, knowing that it sounded lame. Tom took a deep breath and then continued his story.

“So, yeah, your dad like his bars. He met your mother in one of them, actually, and I watched him get into a relationship with her. I never could tell how sincere it was. To me, it looked like he was just trying to convince everyone that he wasn’t gay. Maybe he wanted to convince himself, too.”

There was a pause. They both looked back at the door several times, as if expecting Nopok’s father walk back outside at any moment. After enough time passed, Tom took a deep breath and continued.

“I, meanwhile, stayed on the edge of his life. It felt like he was drifting away, but I wouldn’t let go. I knew that I loved him, and that he loved me. I’ve been trying to get him to drop the bullshit and run away with me for twenty years.”

“Twenty years?”

“Yeah, it’s a long time, though if you let enough of it pass by, it slips away before you know it.”

Nopok tried to think of the right response, something to push Tom to say more. All he could think of, though, was what twenty years looked like. He could not imagine it.

“How could you wait that long?” he finally said.

Tom smiled. “Maybe I liked being a dirty little secret? Besides that, though, we both got stuck in the same trap as everyone in our generation. We got jobs.”

After an awkward moment, Tom shook his head. “So, that’s my life story. Tell me about yourself, Jeff.”

Nopok’s father finally opened the door, breaking the moment. As a group, they entered into the house. It was tidy inside, a typical minimalist spread of furniture, antiques, and music memorabilia. Rush albums were arranged on the walls like family pictures. A gay pride flag adorned the doorway above the kitchen.

Nopok’s father drew little attention to the fact that they were in a new house together, and Tom only offered scattered explanations for the decorations in his house. The details were interesting—Tom had traveled to Europe multiple times over the years, though never for longer than a few weeks at a time, and he always came back with something new to show Nopok’s dad—but Nopok felt that his dad was still holding back. He only chimed in with random comments about how things looked nice. The nervousness was palpable, and Nopok wondered if he was going to be the one who had to push past it. Finally, he just decided to speak his mind.

He chose his moment carefully. After they walked into the living room after circling the house, he turned back towards his father and said, “This is nice. Really nice.”

His father looked stunned. “Yeah, it’s okay.”

“Thanks for bringing me,” Nopok said. “It’s been interesting to come here, to meet Tom too.”

Tom moved closer to Nopok’s father, and their hands found each other.

“Thanks,” his father said, averting his eyes. When he did not say more, Nopok knew that he needed to take the initiative. His father had shared this part of his life for the time ever, and it seemed shocking that he did not know how to explain. Nopok had always thought his father was

more confident than this. He rarely minced words, never ran out of things to say in the car; at least, that had been who he was before leaving Nopok's mom. Maybe things were different now.

If nothing else, Nopok felt that his own difficulties with words finally made sense.

For the rest of the day, Nopok, his father, and Tom just talked, sharing small details from their lives, and all throughout the day, Nopok was shocked by how relieved his father looked, how for the first time in forever, there was a sense of openness to the way they talked with each other. Nopok's father had seen the AIDS scare at a young age, and had been terrified by his attraction to men. Tom, of course, led Nopok's father through the conversation (clearly, he knew Nopok's father at a deeper level than anyone else could), and there was a feeling that Nopok's father and Tom had stumbled into romantic attraction by accident. In the south, they were hesitant to every admit their feelings for each other. Tom's parents, who lived in Mississippi, still did not know, and Nopok's father regretted even giving the hint that he had been gay.

"You just didn't admit to that in the 90s," he said, "especially after what we saw."

Tom, for his part, talked about how things were different now. "Even in the south, there are places where you can be open about it. Like our bar downtown? You know the one."

Nopok's father nodded at that. "Yeah, our bar."

Nopok felt that he had little real role to play in the conversation (which was typical when talking with his father), but he enjoyed listening. Finally, certain parts of his father's life made sense.

At the end, when Nopok said goodbye to Tom and his father began driving him home, Nopok decided that next time, he would tell his dad about his online life. He would talk about Clair, and how playing her made Nopok feel. Maybe his dad would understand. Tom would understand, and might even find the right words to describe how Nopok felt.

What Nopok and his father had now was something they had never before built together: a shared honesty, where they met each other at a real, almost equal moment, shared details that his father was afraid to touch.

Next time, Nopok wanted to be the one to open up. He wanted to try it. The nervousness and awkwardness he saw in himself had been mirrored today by his father, and he would never forget that.

* * *

First thing after entering the house, there was an eerie silence, which was not entirely unusual, but after he closed to door, Nopok found Sammy in the hallway, like he had just been waiting there.

“Hey,” Nopok began, feeling optimistic about his chances of communicating successfully with people.

“Mom wants to see you,” Sammy said, despondent.

“What?” Nopok said.

“I told her not to do it,” Sammy said, visibly frustrated. “I’m so sorry.”

“What’s going on?”

Sammy walked closer, but paused. “I don’t know. She got mad, I think. Maybe because dad came by? She got on your computer.”

Nopok went still. He could feel the heat rush to his face. “She what?”

“I don’t know. I watched her for a minute. I thought she was mad at first, but...”

“Oh my God,” Nopok muttered. Without another word, he ran upstairs, feet tromping on the carpeted steps.

What if she deleted things?

What if she looked at his passwords?

What if she...his mind raced through scenarios, all of them involving a profound breach of privacy. He had not chosen to share those things with her. They were talking to each other now, but he was not anywhere near ready.

“You can’t do this,” he muttered to himself as he threw his door open. “That’s my life on there. My life!”

He burst into his room, ready for a fight.

His mom was at his desk, slumped over his computer. She turned her head. Her expression looked so despondent. Had she been crying?

“I’m sorry,” she said, in a voice that made him shiver. She shut his laptop carefully, as if intentionally trying not to slam it too hard. For a moment, she just sat there, hunched over like she was in pain.

Nopok wanted to say something. He almost asked her what she was doing, then decided not to. Maybe he could ask her if she was okay, but that did not feel right either.

The fact was that there was nothing correct to say in this situation, not a single thing that made sense for anyone to say.

She looked upset. There was no way he could tell why she was upset. He felt angry, but just hearing her voice and the sadness in it had made his own feelings erode, as if her mere presence had melted his indignation like a lava flow, and he was waiting for everything to solidify again into a stable situation.

She stood up. He took a step forward, and she watched him. He backed up, pressing against the door of his closet. Without a word, she stood up straight, composing herself with movement while keeping the focus of her eyes away from him. After a tense moment, she walked out of the room, muttering a quick, “I’m sorry,” again before leaving.

Nopok stood there, dumbfounded, before realizing that he had survived the experience, that it was a moment where everything seemed at stake, but not for him.

He walked to his computer and checked it. His Gamefaqs page was up, showing all his messages. His archive of Gamefaqs posts was also open. He checked his windows and saw that the Word document of the RP topic was also open.

She had opened these things. Maybe she had read them.

Nopok sat down in his chair, so embarrassed that he wanted to scream. A million different ideas of how to handle the situation rushed through his head, none of them quite coalescing into something that made sense.

There were footsteps outside his room. He said nothing. A gentle rap sounded at his door.

“Jeff?”

It was Sammy.

“Yeah?”

The door creaked open, and Sammy entered bashfully.

“What happened?” he asked. Nopok turned and looked at his brother, who seemed afraid to say more. Which was very relatable.

“I don’t know,” Nopok finally said. “She said sorry and went downstairs.”

Sammy wore an expression of absolute befuddlement. “What?”

Nopok just shook his head. “I think she looked around on my computer.”

There was a pause. “And she didn’t say anything?” Sammy asked. “Didn’t she mention anything about what she saw?”

“No,” Nopok said.

Another pause, and Sammy put forth the question before Nopok could voice it. “Why? Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know,” Nopok said. “But I am going to find out.”

* * *

Halfway down the stairs, Nopok felt a sudden fear pop into his chest. What if it was better to let sleeping dogs lie? Just a few days ago, he would have thought nothing of never mentioning this again. There were countless awkward encounters between he and mother over the years, and he had never pressed her to explain herself like this. He had never exploded them into a scene. Every time, Nopok let strange moments dissipate, and then hope time washed away the uncomfortable tension that followed.

But today was different. He had managed a semblance of honesty with his father, and it felt good. With Tom's help, he had broken through a mask that his father had clearly never wanted for him to see behind, and he had finally begun to see himself in his father. They both suffered similar problems, they both hated their own awkwardness, and they had grown closer for letting down their respective guards.

His mother was different. She had not wanted kids. According to his father's stories, he had always been the one to push the idea of a family on her. Nopok had never thought about what that had been like for her. What did she want? Did she have a secret place that she escaped to in order to feel happy, like Nopok did?

She had just broken into his private place, invaded that escape that he had always valued so much. She might have even read the RP topic. There was no telling what she knew about him now.

Nopok wanted to know—he needed to know how much she had read, and he needed to know why she had done it. In an instant, he decided that he had no business pushing deeper than

that. If she had an escape from her life, then he did not have the right to force her to reveal it to him. But he still needed to know why she had done it. Without that answer, Nopok knew that he would begin to hate her. He did not hate her now, no matter how many awkward moments they had shared, no matter how inconsiderate they could be to each other on a daily basis. There was still a semblance of love between them, enough that hope won out at the end of every argument. However, what she had done had created an imbalance, worse than her kicking him out of the house. She had been within her right to do that.

Breaking his privacy: that felt different, at least to Nopok. He loved his online life too much to let it be violated with impunity.

Maybe he was wrong to feel that way. He always doubted his own feelings on things like this, but right now he felt confident that he was doing the right thing.

Still, outside her door, he could not help but feel a final pang of doubt.

What if, at the end of this, she kicked him out, cut him off entirely. And for what? An RP that no longer existed on Gamefaqs? An online life that he knew distracted him from finishing his coursework at school?

No, he told himself. This was about dignity.

He opened the door. His mother was at her desk, head buried in her arms. She said nothing, and that felt strange considering how many times she had yelled at him in the past for intruding upon her when she was at her desk.

“Mom?” he said, not knowing how else to begin. She lifted her head up, but said nothing. “You, uh...” He wavered. Why could he never be confident in these situations? “You looked at my computer.”

“I did,” she said. He waited for more, but she stopped.

“I saw what you opened.”

She put her head back down onto her arms. Nopok almost wanted to leave, right then. He knew that pressing this was going to hurt her, and he could not help but feel sympathy begin to overwhelm him. There was a reason why he had not pressed the issue during so many of their awkward interactions—he had felt like doing so would make him the villain. He still felt like the villain, even bringing this up now.

But unlike all those other times, something inside of him drove him to push on anyway, even if he felt like the villain.

“Why did you do it?” he said.

She looked up at him. Her lips twitched, but she said nothing.

God, she looked embarrassed. How many times had Nopok felt how she looked—too embarrassed to speak, too humiliated to want to exist?

“Why did you do it?” he said again, wanting the answer.

Her first response was a weak, “I don’t know. I was...”

She paused. He just stared, and that seemed to pressure her enough for her to continue.

“I saw the news,” she said. “The local news, channel 24. They said...that there was a bomb threat at your school.”

“So?” he said. Just one word, though, did not feel like enough, so he said, “So what? What does that have to do with anything?”

She stared forward like an animal staring down traffic.

“They said IT was hacked, that maybe an employee did it, someone who knew the systems.”

“What does that have to do with me?” he said. From what she was saying, he couldn’t only assume one thing. She seemed to be scrambling for the right words, though she did not seem confident in saying any of them.

“I know you’re on your computer all the time—all the time, Jeff—and I thought...”

She stopped, and then looked away.

“I thought...”

“What did you think?” Nopok said. His words seemed to hurt her, and he immediately regretted saying them. But he needed to push the issue. He needed clarity. “Did you think I did it?”

She said nothing.

“You think that I could do something like that?”

Her next pause was accusatory, and it made him want to punch the wall.

“I’m not that kind of person, mom!”

There was a long pause, a tense pressure between them that could have imploded deep sea fish.

“I was silly,” she said, “and I’m sorry. I’ve just been so stressed out.”

He took a step closer. “You think I would blow up my school?”

There was no answer. She looked miserable.

Nopok had been in her position countless times: unable to say anything, wishing for the other person to release him from agony.

Even if she was assuming the absolute worst in him, and was embarrassed to admit it, he still felt enough sympathy for her to want to find the right words for once in his life.

“Mom, I wouldn’t do that. I’m a good person. I am.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know why I thought that about you. It was just...a random thought, and then I...”

They both took a moment to breathe. Somehow, some of the tension seemed to leave the room. Nopok sat down on the edge of her bed. She put an elbow against her desk and relaxed.

“It’s okay,” Nopok said, as if reciting a ritual prayer.

“I’m sorry,” his mother said. Her words hung in the air, clearing the room like Windex spray over spilled blood. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay,” Nopok said again. He realized that he had not yet asked what she had seen. He no longer wished to ask, either. “How could you think that about me?” he added.

The honest had set in, and his heart ached. He wondered how she would respond. Would it be with her own honesty?

“I just...” she began, visibly upset. After a moment, she finished, “I guess I...I just don’t know you, Jeff. And I should.”

Nopok cried, and his mother followed.

After the longest time, he invited her up to his room and opened up his laptop.

“Mom,” he began, navigating back to Gamefaqs and clicking on his username. “This is who I am.”

* * *

The conversation took three painful hours, and Nopok decided to make it as detailed as possible. It began with a discussion of his high school online life, how he had used it to escape the misery of his classes.

“You weren’t that miserable,” his mother said, objecting to the idea of him needing an escape. After that, Nopok knew it would be a difficult conversation, but he continued anyway. He wanted her to understand him, after all, and it was worth enduring back-and-forths to get there.

“I was miserable,” he insisted, and he went on to describe how he had made no friends in high school, that even class bullies avoided him. He had been the kid that everyone avoided, the kid that people had in mind when they warned, “don’t underestimate the quiet ones.”

“Maybe you were a little weird,” his mother said, “but that’s just a normal part of growing up.”

After that, he skipped past high school and explained how depressed he had been in college. No friends again, no stability at home, even with his father choosing favorites. When Nopok brought up his ambivalence towards his major, his mother said, “But I thought you liked talking about politics?”

“No one likes talking about politics anymore,” he said in response. “You bring up politics, and suddenly everybody wants to tear each other apart.”

His mother conceded the point, and they moved onto his online life.

“Oh my God, Jeff,” she said, looking at some of his lengthier posts in various forums.

“This is what you spend all your time doing?”

“This is what I enjoy doing,” he said. She sighed.

“You’re wasting your life, Jeff. How can you waste your life like this?”

“This isn’t a waste.”

She raised her voice.

“It is. Wake up. Do you even know how hard life is right now? My God, I’ve sheltered you from so much, and you don’t even...”

She stopped, maybe from some residual embarrassment from before, although time had managed to dull the end point of that conversation quicker than Nopok had expected.

It was simply amazing what some people could get over in such a short amount of time.

“I really don’t know you at all, Jeff,” she said, sounding more frustrated than anything.

“Keep reading,” he said. He checked the time and realized that they had been speaking for over an hour.

And they had just gotten through high school and the beginning of college. Honesty, it seemed, had its drawbacks.

“Nopok,” she said, reading over his username. “God, you’re not going to ask me to call you that now, are you?”

“Mom, it’s a username.”

“I know what it is. Is that who you really are? Nopok?”

Nopok said nothing.

“I don’t know who I’m even talking to. Is it Nopok? Is it Clair?”

“You did read the RP,” he said. Given how embarrassed she had seemed, he was surprised that she had brought it up.

She shook her head. “I’m not making fun of you, okay? I’m not like your father.”

“Dad doesn’t do that.”

She raised her hands. “Okay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought him up. He’s not here anymore.”

There was a pause, so Nopok just said what he was thinking. “I like my username. I’m going to change my real name to it, but I like this username, okay?”

His mother sighed. “It’s so...what does it even mean?”

“It’s a word I made up. My word.”

“Okay,” she said with a nod. There was another pause. “What about Clair? You role play as this Clair person: an assassin.”

“Yeah.”

She gave him an odd look. “You don’t...hurt people, do you Jeff?”

“No.”

“And you don’t...hurt yourself, either? Do you?”

“No, mom.”

She looked relieved.

“I’m sorry. I must sound so...I don’t know. I’m sorry, though.”

“It’s okay.” He wiped away sweat. “It’s been a long day.”

She did not disagree with him.

After some more reading over his posts, she finally said, “I don’t understand why you need to be a part of this...what is it?”

“An RP.”

“A role play, yes. Why can you talk to people on there but not to me? You don’t talk to anyone, Jeff. Nobody knows what you’re thinking.”

Nopok felt a mix of embarrassment and irritation at that, but sided with caution in his reply. “I’m sorry, all right? I know I’m not easy to talk to.”

“No, you’re not,” his mother said. After another sigh, she added, “None of us are, I guess. It’s a family problem.”

Nopok smiled at that, and she smiled too.

“You can talk to me, you know,” she said.

He gave her a surprised look. “You tried to kick me out of the house.”

“I was stressed out, and your father...”

“I’m not my father,” Nopok said, loudly.

She avoided his gaze. “I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

He paused, not quite knowing how to accept an apology from her. As if sensing that, she continued reading.

“I really am sorry,” she said. “I could have done more to get to know you. But...you didn’t see it like I did. When you were high school, I was worried you would burn the house down. I made sure to go to sleep after you so I knew I was safe.”

“Mom...”

“I know I have problems, Jeff. I’m trying to work on them. But you’ve got to work on yours too, okay? I need more from you than silence. I just...I can’t handle you not saying anything. I go crazy wondering what you’re thinking, what you’ll do.”

Nopok froze, more frustrated than angry. “I’m not going to *do* anything, mom.”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

“I live here!” Nopok said, louder than he needed to. There was an awkward pause.

“You live there,” his mom said, pointing at the computer screen. She then pointed down.

“I need you here too.

“It’s too late for this speech, mom.”

“It’s not too late,” his mother said. “Okay? It’s never too late. Maybe we should have talked before, years ago. Maybe that was the best time to do this. But the second best time is right now, because we need each other, and you know why: to survive your father.”

“I’m okay with dad,” Nopok said. “He’s not the villain here.”

“And I am?” his mother said, staring him down. He wanted to melt.

“No,” Nopok said. He sighed, gathering the words. “I don’t blame you for anything, mom. I don’t hate you, either. I just want things to be easy.”

His mother hesitated, clearly thinking hard about something, and then finally sighed.

“That’s all I want too, Jeff.”

“Then let’s make things easy.”

For a moment, his mother just sat there. She nodded, then crossed her fingers together, and then paced around his room for a while before coming back to the computer.

“Okay,” she said. Her attention went back to the computer. “I do know what a role play is, Jeff. You don’t need to think I’m completely ignorant about the world.”

Nopok froze, surprised at her tone. It sounded like she was genuinely trying to mend her shattered pride. “Yeah?”

“Of course. I’m not that old.”

Nopok thought for a moment, and then felt foolish when he realized that he could not remember how old his mother was.

“I know,” he said.

“When I was your age,” she said, her tone taking on more confidence, “I played Dungeons and Dragons, you know. The tabletop game? You know it?”

“Of course,” he said. “You played D&D?”

“Your grandfather loved it. I played every now and then with some friends.” She paused, and when she continued, there was a sentimental tone to her voice. “I haven’t seen any of them in so long. I wonder how they’re doing.”

“Grandad liked D&D?” Nopok said, still in shock.

“Yes,” she said, grinning. “He even met Gary Gygax. Do you want to hear about it? He told the story all the time?”

Nopok, of course, replied that he would.

* * *

At 8 pm, Nopok found time to get on the computer by himself again. He still felt almost flushed with amazement. He, his mother, and Sammy had continued the story about their grandfather's D&D games at the dinner table. Sammy had even offered the customary Mormon family prayer.

Somehow, the topic of what had happened with Nopok's dad never came up, and even though Nopok knew that it would eventually, he had confidence that he could explain things to everyone now. The tension between them all had not disappeared—there were still things about how they looked at each other, how they reacted to little gestures and comments, that hinted at years of unhappiness and disfunction. But, as a family, they were talking. They had connected through discussions of games, of things that Nopok would never have imagined speaking with his mother about before today.

Honesty had nearly broken him, but it had also saved him, in a way. He felt exhausted from the day's experiences, but there was still one more thing to do before the end of the day.

By the time Nopok checked the forum, Typhoon had replied multiple times already to Nopok's direct messages. The first message was short and simple: [*You're a lifesaver! Yes! Thank you!*] The next few answers asked for details about what they should do, and then a final one offered a surprising detail.

[*Gizmos got in touch with me, and he is NOT okay with what happened. Apparently, it was an admin, not the mods. He had nothing to do with it.*]

[*Glad to hear that,*] Nopok said, beginning his reply to that message. [*I'd hate to lose our vampire companion.*]

His next DM to Typhoon gave the location of where Nopok planned to restart the RP. [*Go to the forum for a Commodore 64 game called *The Raid on Bungeling Bay*. We'll restart there, and no admins or mods will no about it. Nobody has posted there in forever. And if we get axed again, we can just make it work again somewhere else. I'll pay for a website if I have to.*]

Before looking over his copied posts in his records, Nopok checked the forum again just to confirm that the topic was gone.

Someone had gone into that topic, seen the effort and love the users were clearly putting into it, and decided to destroy it. How sad. The Internet could be such a toxic place, even though it did not have to be. The RP was proof that good things—friendships, identities—could bloom online

Nopok went to his Word file and copied every letter that had been written in the RP up until now. All those feelings, all of that nostalgia and happiness, and he carried it onto a new forum on Gamefaqs. It was a forum he had laid claim to in jest. Dedicated to an old Commodore 64 game called *The Raid on Bungeling Bay*, it was not a forum that anyone else would have looked at for years.

He started a new topic, titled it “RP Revival,” and pasted the contents of the RP onto it. It was funny how all it took to save something like the RP was a good habit of backing things up and then a quick stroke of the Control and V keys.

Life, it never made saving anything that easy, not for the things that mattered the most.