“Hurry up, we’re going to be late!” Glancing at his watch, Callum cursed under his breath. There was no way they were going to make it in time.

Callum’s two younger brothers, Wesley and Tyron, spilled out of the hotel room door behind him.

“I thought you said we needed to leave at 10 am,” Wesley interjected.

“No, I said we needed to *be there* at 10 am,” Callum chided.

“Oh,” said Wesley. “Well, maybe next time make that more clear. Ty and I were under a completely different impression. Right, Ty?”

Tyron looked up from his phone. “Um...yep. Yeah. Wait. Cal, why didn’t you remind us right before we left? Sounds like you lost track of time.”

Wesley nodded vehemently in support. “Yeah, what gives, Cal?”

Callum sighed. “Whatever. Let’s just get going. We came all the way to Nova Demos for this convention. Not sure why we wasted away in our hotel room the whole morning. We may still be able to make it.”

Callum ordered a taxi on his watch as the door shut behind them. The three brothers moved quickly through the hotel corridor and entered the elevator.

“Ground floor,” Tyron said into thin air.

The elevator beeped in recognition, then started descending rapidly. Wesley kneeled on the glass floor to knot his neglected untied shoes, staring through the translucent pane as the ground floor approached.

The elevator dinged, and the three brothers raced through the lobby. A prosaic silver car was waiting outside in the hotel’s front circle. Callum held his watch up to a peephole-looking camera above the window of the passenger seat. A robotic voice came from the camera, “Callum Gylo. Reservation confirmed.” The passenger door handle clicked, and Callum opened the door. Tyron and Wesley shuffled into the back seat.

Callum tapped his phone, indicating they were ready to go. The wheel turned left out of the hotel circle.

As the car moved through the streets of Nova Demos, Wesley stared out the window, mouth agape. Towers shot into the clouds, disappearing beyond a vertical horizon. Entire walls of buildings were rainbow mosaics of electronic billboards, seamlessly transitioning from one advertisement to the next. Glancing around, Wesley noticed there was barely anyone walking on the street. He opened the window and glanced up. Dizzying networks of bridges connected neighboring buildings as far up as Wesley could see, making him wonder why the buildings were separate to begin with.

After ten more minutes, the car stopped outside a large building with several sets of double doors spanning the entrance. Above the doors blinked a neon banner that read “Welcome to the 16th Annual VRCon!” The brothers started a light jog as they pushed open the car doors and slid through the entrance. They hopped up every other step of the escalator and stopped at a table where a pink-haired woman was sitting.

“We’re here for the Tarameter 4 keynote speech,” Callum sputtered out between breaths.

The woman gazed at Callum with large, blue eyes. “Oh hun! I’m sorry! You just missed the last call,” she replied in a high octave. She looked back over her shoulder, pretending to verify her statement. Four suited security guards stared back at her.

Callum glanced at his watch: 10:02 am.

“Brilliant,” he muttered, glancing back at Wesley and Tyron.

The two younger brothers flashed apologetic glances. “We’re sorry, Cal. There should be plenty of opportunities to network after the event anyways, right? And you can just watch the speech on your phone anyways,” Wesley said.

“And,” the woman chimed in, “there are plenty of other VR products that you can try out in the Main Showroom.”

Callum mustered up a wry smile. “All right,” he conceded. Wesley made a good point too. Being at the keynote speech wasn’t everything.

Wesley led the way down the wide, carpeted hallway of the convention center. Behind him, Callum checked his watch one last time and allowed the last remnants of regret to dissipate. Tyron nonchalantly strolled behind his two brothers, expressionless while watching something on his phone.

Wesley felt his feet become lighter when he saw an electronic banner with an arrow pointing left towards “Main Showroom.” He turned the corner and stopped immediately, mouth agape.

Callum stared at his brother’s face in front of him, then reached down and feigned a grabbing motion near the floor.

“Wes, you dropped this,” Callum said with a smirk, swiping underneath his brother’s jaw with his hand. Wesley’s teeth clacked together from the impact, snapping him out of his temporary stupor.

“Cal, you could’ve punched me in the face, and I wouldn’t have cared,” Wesley beamed.

Callum’s smirk was wiped clean off his face when he himself turned the corner and stared into the showroom. A sprawling hangar filled with all sorts of booths, displays, and dazzling neon signs loomed before him.

Wesley was already trying on a helmet given to him by one vendor, a bald guy in his late thirties who would tell you too much about his beard if you asked. The helmet had checkered flags on the sides and a shaded vizor that blocked Wesley’s eyes. The vendor gestured to a comfy-looking leather gaming chair, which Wesley plopped into.

“Wow! I can smell the asphalt!” Wesley exclaimed, Callum now standing next to his brother, arms crossed.

“What VR system does this run on?” Callum asked the vendor.

Hands on his hips as if to assert dominance, the vendor proudly replied, “Both the Tarameter 3 as well as the Alucard Matrix.”

“Nice.” Wesley and his brothers had bought the first version of the Tarameter system when they were teenagers. The three had competed endlessly in a wide array of virtual sports, almost always ending in a squabble. Callum definitely preferred Tarameter’s products to Alucard’s, mostly because Tarameter was one of the few independent companies still standing in Alucard’s massive corporate shadow.

“You ready, man?” the vendor turned towards Wesley.

“Yep! Let’s do this,” Wesley said giddily.

At a desk behind Wesley, a middle-aged woman wearing sunglasses and a red racing-style cap typed furiously on a computer that had a “Vicarious Velocity” sticker slapped in the center. Next to the woman was a monitor, where Callum saw his brother appear in a crimson racing suit and checkered-flag helmet.

Callum watched the monitor as a virtual copy of Wesley climbed into a maroon sports car, its eight-cylinder engine purring with glee. A traffic light appeared on the side of the screen.

“All right! Green means go!” the vendor said with jaded enthusiasm. Wesley revved the car’s engine, releasing a furious growl.

The traffic light flashed three red lights, then a green. Callum saw Wesley frantically propel his car forward into the first turn. A pastiche of different car colors and makes vied with Wesley for an advantage. Stepping closer to the monitor, Callum saw his brother dart around the first corner in third place.

The race continued across the desolate track, with Wesley overtaking a turquoise car flaunting a boisterous spoiler. He was still well behind the leader, a rather antique-looking white car with a pair of red-blue stripes painted down the middle.

Tyron had caught up to his brothers, eyes still fastened to his phone.

Callum pulled his eyes away from the monitor. “Ty, you gonna give this a shot? It’s a racing sim.”

“Maybe,” Tyron replied, sweeping a long lock of hair out of his transfixed eyes.

Despite a series of tactical maneuvers by Wesley, the antique-looking car had some clever answers of its own, allowing it to come across the finish line in first place. Wesley removed his helmet, and the monitor went dark.

“It felt like if I let go of the steering wheel or made a bad turn, I’d be done for,” he blurted, out of breath. Wesley looked up at the bald man, flashing his timeless smile. “I’ll definitely purchase it for my Tarameter system!”

“Excellent! Glad you enjoyed it! Would anyone else care to try?” asked the vendor.

“Yeah, I’ll give it a go,” Tyron said in a voice barely above a murmur. Callum and Wesley both knew what their brother sounded like when he was trying to conceal his eagerness.

The vendor handed Tyron the helmet and again nodded at his partner. Tyron sat down in the gaming chair and placed his hands on the steering wheel.

Tyron opted for the same maroon sports car. Wesley and Callum watched as he deftly navigated the desert course, passing each competitor with smooth nonchalance. By the third lap, he had developed such a lead that he was beginning to pass the stragglers. And on the fifth and final lap, Tyron snuck past the antique-looking car a second time.

Glancing up from his handheld tablet, the vendor looked startled. “That’s…” he trailed off and walked over to his equally astonished partner behind the desk.

Tyron rejoined his brothers, still playing the nonchalant routine by burrowing his hands into his jean pockets. “It was all right,” he said with a half-shrug. “But I’m sure there are cooler systems out there.” As he turned to go, the vendor shouted from behind them.

“Sir, sir! Do you know what you just did?”

Without turning around, Tyron cocked his head back slightly over his shoulder. “Not really.”

The vendor looked at Tyron as if he’d been waiting to meet him his entire life. “You just set a world course record! Using a default car! On your first try! Have you ever played a Vicarious Velocity game before?”

“No, but I’ve watched people play it,” Tyron admitted. “Mechanics weren’t that hard to pick up once I was behind the wheel.”

“Well, could we have your contact info? We’d like to send you a free copy of the game. You may even have a future as a pro! Our circuit is pretty competitive, but we think you’d thrive.”

Callum and Wesley both knew Tyron was glowing on the inside, but that just made him act more mysterious on the outside. So they broke into a fit of stifled laughter when Tyron replied, “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Leaving the racing demo behind them, the brothers darted from booth to booth in the Main Showroom. Each game was impressive in its own right, but Callum was disheartened each time he saw the Alucard Corporation logo, a red castle, printed somewhere on a booth or on a virtual reality headset. He reminisced back when independent game developers thrived in their own community, shielded from the allure of large corporate titles. Nowadays, Alucard had become so dominant, independent developers had either been hired by Alucard or were reduced to hobbyists. Alucard ran a tight ship when it came to its virtual reality games. Their software was state-of-the-art, but incredibly proprietary. No random developer in her mom’s basement would be able to figure out how to configure a game to be compatible with Alucard’s software without their explicit approval.

While still musing on the state of virtual reality games, a nondescript booth in the back corner of the showroom caught Callum’s eye. There were no flashing displays, neon banners, or other sensory infiltrations. An older, well-groomed man in a collared shirt sat with his hands folded on the table in front of him. Streaks of grey hair were beginning to crawl up his sideburns. In front of him was what looked like a large terrarium: a large board of trees and painted water features, all encapsulated by a glass dome. Intrigued by this setup, Callum glanced over his shoulder to see if Wesley and Tyron were around.

Wesley was having a conversation with a dark-skinned woman who flaunted a copious amount of glitter on her face. They both laughed and simultaneously looked at Callum, then awkwardly looked back at each other when Callum returned their gaze. Then they laughed again. Even harder.

Tyron had been behind Callum this whole time, discreetly watching whatever was on his phone.

“Ty, didn’t you come here for the convention?” Callum asked his brother, subconsciously adopting a paternal tone.

“I am here. At the convention,” Tyron retorted.

“Good one, pal,” Callum chided back. “I’m going to check out this booth in the back with the cool terrarium-looking thing. Want to come?”

“Sure,” Tyron said in a semi-sarcastic tone. The two brothers moved towards the back.

The man at the booth was wearing a pair of green thick-framed glasses, staring intently at the terrarium in front of him. He didn’t look up at Callum and Tyron as they approached. Callum gave a sweeping wave, and the man looked up at them.

“Oh, hello. I apologize for not noticing you. I do not draw too much attention back here.” The man spoke at a very calculated cadence, as if he was reading from a script he had already written.

“Is this a game? Or just art?” Callum asked. Now that he was closer, he was able to make out several model villages spread across the terrarium. Each tiny village was uniquely designed. Some had bridges stretching across rivers, others were shrouded by tall trees. Worn dirt roads snaked between the villages and stretched across open plains.

The sitting man chuckled, imminent wrinkles squeezing at the folds of his face. “You are quick to divide the two. I prefer to think of this as both.”

Callum felt uneasy, but couldn’t deny he was enthralled by the mystery of the sitting man and his game. “How do you play?”

The sitting man extended an open palm, gesturing for Callum to sit in the empty chair across from him. Tyron stood behind Callum and nodded to the sitting man. Then, the sitting man handed Callum and Tyron identical pairs of green thick-framed glasses. Callum studied them for a few seconds, then heard Tyron gasp behind him. Unfolding the temples, Callum raised the glasses to his face and put them on. He looked back at Tyron, who was now standing over the terrarium. Callum stood up next to his brother and let out an audible *woah*.

The entire terrarium had come to life. Trees rattled in a soft breeze. Rivers and creeks trickled along with meandering enthusiasm. Fantastic churches and towering gates stood amongst cozy villages with wooden homes. Between all of this, miniature figurines moved freely. Callum crouched down and became eye-level with a figure wearing a leather suit of armor riding a horse near the edge of the terrarium. The knight paid Callum’s giant blinking eyes no mind and rode off across the plains.

The sitting man was smiling to himself. “Choose a purpose. Then choose a character,” he answered Callum in a soft voice.

Callum looked back at Tyron. “You want to go first?” he asked, already knowing his brother’s answer.

“No, you can,” Tyron replied, still focused on the autonomous exhibit in front of him.

Callum stood up from his crouched position and looked at the sitting man. “I think I need a little bit more information before I make my choice. Is this a game you can win? And if so, how?”

The frames of the sitting man’s glasses gleamed as he looked towards the terrarium. “This is an augmented reality simulation of 16th century England. The simulation runs for 50 years, the approximate lifetime of someone living during that time period. Your goal, by the end of the time period, is to get the feudal lord to leave his castle.” The man pointed to an elaborate tiered building surrounded by a lush, manicured garden and several concentric walls.

“You are able to choose one of five characters: merchant, artist, princess, knight, or monk. The merchant earns fame through the accumulation of wealth. The artist earns fame by inspiring others. The princess through her beauty. The knight through prowess in combat. And the monk obtains fame by trying not to.”

“So we need to become famous...to get the feudal lord to come and meet us?” Callum asked.

The sitting man nodded. “That is correct. The feudal lord is the most important person in the region. Being granted an audience with him at his castle is an incredible accomplishment for itself. But having him come and appear before you is a clear acknowledgement of your power.”

Callum already had a good idea of which character he wanted to choose. “And what about this ‘purpose’ you mentioned?”

The sitting man cleared his throat with a few forced coughs. “Having the five characters be limited to their archetype would make for a very boring game. By choosing a cause, you give your character a purpose. Some purposes will land your character in a lot of trouble. Others will gain them much respect. In the end, this is a way for you, the player, and myself, the developer, to interact.”

Callum felt a massive dopamine rush overcome him. He hadn’t felt like this about a game in years. All the games he’d been playing recently had only been concerned with grabbing his attention and keeping it. None had any philosophical underpinnings or nuanced character design. They all left him feeling like an empty shell each time he logged off. This was different. This was a real game.

“Ok, I’ve made my choice,” Callum declared, overflowing with enthusiasm. The sitting man matched Callum’s expression with a warm smile.

“I will be a monk. My purpose is to provide spiritual guidance to anyone who asks.”

The sitting man moved the fingers of his left hand in synchrony across a small screen on the table Callum hadn’t seen before. “Ok. You are the avatar with the red diamond over its head.” Callum scanned the terrarium and found the red diamond floating over a boy in his late teens with a shaved head and brown robes. He was sitting cross-legged underneath a tall, rust-colored gateway, listening to an older monk discuss something.

“Beginning simulation,” stated the sitting man.

Everything accelerated. Callum felt like he was watching a time lapsed film, which, in a way, he was. The young monk suddenly stood up from his position underneath the gateway, then walked far along a nearby mountain path. He found a smooth rock jutting out over a cliff and sat down, again cross-legged, and closed his eyes. Once dark began to settle in, the monk walked back along the path and entered a small building that Callum assumed to be his quarters. This all happened in a few seconds.

“That was one day,” noted the sitting man. “Simulating an entire lifetime usually takes around a half-hour. Most people don’t have the time to sit around and watch. Their lives are busy. I understand. So an option exists where I can run the simulation so it only takes 30 seconds. After it has run, I can provide you with the legacy of your character’s life, and reenact key interactions they had.”

“Like a highlight reel?” It was Wesley and his contagious grin. Callum and Tyron weren’t even sure how long he had been behind them. Somehow a pair of green thick-framed glasses had also found its way onto his face.

The sitting man answered with another warm smile. “Yes, if you would like to think of it that way.”

“Okay, let’s do that,” Callum said.

The sitting man tapped the small screen again, and the entire terrarium became an indiscernible blur of motion. A dim light traced the inner edge of the terrarium’s glass dome, disappearing just as fast, then reappearing on the other side after a brief period of darkness. Callum discerned a small metal device on the outer edge of the glass dome that seemed to be responsible for the light. Again and again this happened. The first ten seconds, the monk did not leave the temple. But it soon began traveling across the entire terrarium, hopping from village to village. Ten seconds after that, it once again returned to the temple. It remained there until the red diamond disappeared from above its head.

“Simulation complete,” said the sitting man. “Your score is 12.13.”

“Is that...bad? That feels bad,” Callum said with a half smile.

“If you get the feudal lord to leave his castle, you receive a score of 100. That is beating the game. The best score possible is 105.”

“Wow. I am utter garbage at this game. But that’s old news.” Callum sighed. He really thought this would be the game to prove to Wesley and Tyron that he was talented at *something*. Tyron was a natural at any sort of competition, and Wesley had an effortless likability about him. Callum constantly felt he needed to prove to his younger brothers that he was more than just their older brother, although he would never tell them that.

The sitting man continued tapping away at his screen. “Here’s a key interaction that occurred during your character’s life.”

The terrarium quickly morphed to a scene where Callum’s monk, now middle-aged, was now kneeling at the bed of an older monk. The older monk looked stricken with illness, a wet towel folded neatly on his forehead. A fleeting ray from a gentle sunset cast a chromatic hue through the stained glass window onto the two monks.

“Teacher, I have searched far and wide for the answer to the question you asked me as a young student. But after traveling to a number of villages and talking with those living there, I still cannot answer that question. I have failed you.” The young monk’s voice came through small speakers installed in the temples of the thick-framed glasses that rested above the wearers’ ears.

“And yet, by coming back to visit me, your actions prove you know the answer, even if your mind is not yet sure,” the bedridden teacher croaked.

The young monk thought about this for a while, and there was a long period of silence. After a minute, the young monk folded his hands behind his back and walked on the other side of the bed to look at the sunset.

“If a higher power was watching every step of my life, would they be able to determine the most important moment?” the young monk asked himself his unanswered question aloud.

Callum staggered back, all color drained from his face. “What the hell? They’re self aware. How are they able to ask questions like that?” he asked the sitting man, aghast.

“Do not worry,” the sitting man said in his calculated tone. “They have not yet developed beyond very basic primitive technology. Think. Even if we were in their shoes, what would we be able to do about it? We ponder existential questions every day. Will this action help me in my life, or not? How should I conduct myself around others? And so on.”

“That’s a good point!” Wesley noted emphatically.

Callum turned to look at his brothers, removing his glasses. “Do one of you guys want to give it a try?” he asked, trying to conceal his shame as much as possible.

“Wesley. You go,” said Tyron. “Just don’t choose the monk.”

Wesley flashed a quick smirk.

“Don’t worry. Mister Terrarium Man, I’ll be an artist. My purpose is to inspire others to look at their environment in new ways,” Wesley proclaimed.

“Very well,” the sitting man acknowledged. He seemed to only have two expressions: a stoic, pensive face that he returned to when he wasn’t smiling softly.

“Beginning simulation,” he announced.

Wesley noticed a red diamond appear above a messy dark-haired teenager sitting in a one-room house buried deep in a forest laden with oak trees. The teenager was observing an older woman strum a harp with a delicate elegance. The woman’s shrill voice grated Wesley’s ears, but as he adjusted, he looked closer at the woman. Her posture was rigid, adding effortless confidence behind her every word. Wesley looked at the young boy and imagined that his face must mirror the boy’s awestruck one.

The terrarium began moving in a blur, the makeshift sun coasting along the edge of the glass perimeter once again. Wesley watched the red diamond closely, but the boy never left the older woman’s side. The leaves of the trees started to turn remarkable hues of red and orange. Strong winds soon dismissed the leaves to the ground, giving way to barren wooden skeletons. This cycle took six seconds to repeat. Then, after a number of iterations, Wesley watched the boy, now a man, leave his home with a pack. He borrowed a horse from a stable at the edge of the forest, then followed a quiet road to a village.

After arriving at the village, the man disappeared into a ramshackle cabin, now only identifiable by the red diamond that floated above its roof. Five seconds passed, and the man emerged a scraggly transfiguration of his former self. He was holding what seemed to be a large stack of paper. The man walked through the village, disappearing into another building just to reappear milliseconds later without the paper. Immediately after, the man departed from the village on the same road he had come on. After a few seconds, a mass exodus of people from the village started following the road to where the man lived. And then everything went dark.

“Simulation complete,” announced the sitting man. “Your score is 79.32.”

Wesley crossed his arms, smiling and nodding to himself. “Yeah, yeah, yeah!”

“Can we see an important interaction in the artist’s life?” Callum asked. He was not asking for insight into Wesley’s higher score. Rather, he had been so unnerved by the self-awareness of his monk character that he wanted to see if Wesley’s artist acted similarly.

“Of course,” replied the sitting man. The terrarium brightened once again. The man was kneeling next to the harp-playing woman. She had aged considerably, but she still maintained the same rigid posture from years earlier. Callum surmised this interaction must have taken place after the man had returned from his stay in the village.

“Paul, do you think your paintings will upset people?” she asked.

Paul said nothing at first. He held a distant gaze that seemed to look through his mother. Dark rings sunk deep under his eyes like off-color eyeliner.

“If they want them to,” he finally said. “But I do believe that a light needs to be shined on the darkest shadows of this world. There is a lot we do not know, and a lot we turn a blind eye to.”

Paul removed a rolled-up piece of paper from his tunic and unraveled it in front of the woman. It was a picture of the back of a young woman sitting underneath a naked tree, a full moon floating overhead. Behind the woman stood a hooded figure wearing a black satin robe, brandishing a vicious scythe in its right hand. The woman was holding a hand mirror, and in it reflected the skeletal face of the figure standing behind her.

The terrarium darkened. Callum and Wesley exchanged concerned glances.

“Anyone else?” the sitting man asked, not faltering in the slightest.

“I’m ready,” Tyron answered, also unfettered. “One question before I begin - how is the score calculated?”

The sitting man grinned. “There are 10,000 people in the simulation. The game is able to count the number of people who know who the character is every year. This percentage is then averaged over each year the character is alive. Wesley, your character had a peak score of 87.44 before he died.”

“Ok,” said Tyron, brushing his bangs out of his hazel eyes. “I’m going to be a knight, with the goal to establish a new feudal kingdom by any means possible. Emphasis on *any means possible*.”

Callum raised an eyebrow and looked at Tyron. He had the same look on his face seconds before he had put on the helmet for the racing simulator.

“Beginning simulation,” said the sitting man.

The red diamond appeared above a young man kneeling on a porch of a three-story house. Rain slid off from the curved roof above and cascaded miniature waterfalls in front of the young man’s face. Tyron was able to make out the young man’s expression: a somber complexion much like his own. But Tyron thought he saw something else burning beneath the surface. The edges of the young man’s mouth curled slightly down, and his eyebrows were quivering slightly.

The young man stood up, turned around, and walked through the slightly ajar door behind him. Through the small gap in the door, Tyron was able to make out a large number of people squeezed into the room. They were all kneeling around a portrait of a middle-aged man that stood above a white urn painted with blue flowers.

The simulation accelerated. Over the next ten seconds, the young man made frequent trips on horseback from his home to the main village. Each trip, he was flanked by four other knights, each with a different color armor: red, black, green, and blue. Each time the young man arrived home, there were new knights and well-dressed men there to greet him and his four companions.

As the young man grew older, he began wearing a knight’s helmet that was as dark as the night sky. He then began riding to smaller villages instead of the main village. However, he no longer brought his four armor-clad companions. Instead, he brought hundreds. All sorts of men followed the man in the straw hat: grimy bandits, honorable knights, well-dressed merchants. Their one goal upon arriving at each village was clear: destruction. Men watched as their wives were slaughtered in front of their own eyes. Their children were thrown into the river or trampled by the horses. The man with the dark helmet had a clear modus operandi after ransacking a village: leave one family alive.

Another five seconds passed. The man and his companions continued to plunder and annihilate small villages without consequence or retaliation. Across the terrarium, villages had collapsed into layers of rubble and splintered wood. Then a blue diamond appeared above the feudal lord’s castle.

A group of three hundred men on horses intercepted the dark-helmeted man’s rogue battalion after they had just finished upending another village. A battle ensued, with the rogues defeating the feudal lord’s men in seconds without suffering many casualties. The blue diamond then leapt away from the feudal lord’s castle and started moving towards the location of the battle.

The fastest way for the feudal lord to reach his fallen men was to cross a wide river by a narrow bridge. As he approached the bridge, the rogue knights readied themselves to intercept them on the other side. The blue diamond made its way across the narrow bridge alone. The feudal lord kneeled in the center of the bridge, but did not move any closer to the opposite side of the bridge.

From the other side, the dark-helmeted man met the feudal lord at the center. Suddenly, the feudal lord removed a concealed blade. Wesley and Callum released a collective gasp. The blade rested in the lord’s hand for a second before plunging it deep into his own stomach. Without a moment’s hesitation, the dark-helmeted man bellowed triumphantly and sliced the lord’s head off with a concealed blade of his own. The blue diamond disappeared.

The terrarium instantly went dark. “Simulation complete,” the sitting man said. “Your score: 101. Congratulations.”

Callum and Wesley did not even try to conceal the stunned looks on their faces. Tyron had crossed his arms. His hazel eyes brimmed with a sense of understanding and self-assurance. “That was the most fun I’ve had in a *long* time,” he said to himself under his breath.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Callum belched. “You expect us to believe that the way to get the feudal lord out of his castle is senseless violence?”

“Was it senseless?” the sitting man countered. He tapped on his screen and the simulation reverted to the very first scene, where the young man was standing outside watching the rain fall. His face was distorted with rage and anguish, just as before.

“Simon, come pay your final respects to your father,” a feminine voice echoed from behind the sliding panel door.

Simon walked through the open gap in the door and disappeared. After a few seconds of silence, a voice said from behind the closed door, “Mother, I am old enough to know what happened. Father was killed defending what he believed was right: opening the territory’s borders to trade with the outside world. But the feudal lord sent his peons to kill Father without a moment of negotiation. Not a single moment! To act on such an impulse...it only tells me that he is very afraid. I shall show the lord that his fear is not unfounded.”

The terrarium went dark again.

Callum’s temper had not simmered. “Avenging your father is one thing, but massacring an uncountable number of people is another.”

“It got out of Simon’s hands,” Wesley said. “He wanted what was best for the region, but unsuccessful merchants and poor workers transformed his motive into a reason to channel their own frustrations. At some point, Simon himself definitely thought they were losing sight of their initial goals, but didn’t speak up for fear of being ostracized and killed himself.”

The sitting man nodded. “Given that there was no exacted political system at the time, violence on innocents was the people’s primary way to indicate dissatisfaction with anything the feudal lord was doing.”

“Tch. I can’t believe you guys are excusing this,” Callum scowled.

“It simply takes a different form nowadays,” Tyron interjected.

Callum eyed his brother through narrowed eyelids. “Regardless, this game must be incredibly hard to sell. A few plays through like we just did, and you’ve had your fun. Not to mention you need all this special equipment.” He removed the green thick-framed glasses from his face and handed them back to the sitting man.

A newfound expression appeared on the sitting man’s face: dismay. “You’re correct,” he admitted. “Sharing my game at this convention is really the only way people get to play it, as it requires both the physical terrarium as well as the glasses. One day, I hope it becomes popular enough where people will wait in long lines in order to experience the simulation.”

“You can’t replicate the terrarium and sell that with the glasses?” Wesley asked.

“Unfortunately not,” the sitting man. “The simulation only works in my presence.” With that, the sitting man stood up and turned around. Several red and black wires trailed out of the man’s nape and disappeared under the table that the terrarium was on. By facing them and remaining still the entire game, he had concealed it from the three brothers. “Everything you see in the terrarium, I generate in my head.”

Even Tyron shuddered at this revelation. Seeing only shock on the brothers’ faces, the sitting man continued. “This does not mean that all the scenarios that just played out were live. That would imply that I create all the outcomes on the spot, which is no fun for the player. Instead, I have pre-recorded hundreds of thousands of scenarios based on possible responses players could give.”

With that, the terrarium turned dark, then revealed a massive hangar-sized room. The room had several booths, each bustling with people. Callum spotted one booth with a red diamond floating above it, and staggered back in horror at his realization. It was himself, his brothers, and the sitting man. Standing and talking. The terrarium was now showing the Main Showroom.

He squinted closer at the miniature versions of himself and his brothers, and was able to see that they too were staring at an even smaller terrarium. Within that microscopic terrarium, an even smaller version of the Main Showroom was on display, with an even smaller red diamond floating above the booth they were at.

Callum staggered back in a mixture of confusion and disbelief. Surely, he thought, he must have dozed off while still hooked up to his Tarameter console, and his dreams had just become infused with a virtual reality. He would wake up, and he and his brothers would head to the convention again like they had planned. On time.

As panic slowly metastasized inside Callum, he stuck his thumb mid-way into his mouth and bit down. It was the standard check every virtual reality player knew by heart. The pain was vivid, but his environment did not change.

*This is real*, Callum thought. But now he was a lot less sure what those words meant to him.