

## COUNTER/Weight 33: A Fractal Garden and an Intercepted Message

Transcribed by Jackie (@astronbot)

[MUSIC - "The Long Way Around"]

AUSTIN: OriCon Expeditionary Group Chief Strategy Officer, Trentin Blackford, was pacing. He realized recently that he was always pacing when he was with the Minerva twins, but knowing that didn't ease his anxious gait. How could it, with the Steiger siblings glaring at him like this? Crystal broke the silence first, each word as sharp as it was blunt,

AUSTIN (as Crystal): As far as we can tell you've already lost Ionias and Joypark.

AUSTIN (as Colleen): And Tetrakal and Vysh,

added Colleen.

AUSTIN (as Crystal): Kaffe too.

The twins spoke with a ping-pong rhythm, and it left Blackford off balance, just like it had each of Minerva's corporate rivals before.

AUSTIN (as Crystal): "Is Archon secure? Is September? Whatever confidential programme you claim is at work there, has OriCon expeditionary left *that* at risk too?"

As Blackford responded he took six steps along the far end of the conference room, turned, and repeated the nervous trot again.

AUSTIN (as Blackford): No, no, no. The Institute is fine. It's *fine*. I'm sure it's... Why are you looking at me like that?

Blackford stopped pacing, why even go through the motions of fleeing when they'd already caught him.

AUSTIN (as Colleen): The Institute? Now that is interesting. Tell us more about this institute.

But they knew enough already. They knew where to look and who to send. Colleen shot her twin a look and with a few small gestures they put their agent in play.

[MUSIC - "The Long Way Around" fades out — 01:41]

AUSTIN: Then make your way into the campus.

JACK: Great. What are we doing here?

AUSTIN: Good question. I still have no idea.

JACK: No, me neither. Cass? Mako? [laughs] What are we doing here?

ART: You and Mako are going to go find information on Rigour, me and Aria are gonna go find September.

ALI: Right.

ART: Maybe we're gonna stay together a little more to see if once Mako's inside he could find out some actionable information on where we're going.

ALI: Yeah.

JACK: That'd be good.

AUSTIN: Where are you heading once you're literally inside the gate, though? Like, you're in—

ART: Student affairs?

AUSTIN: Okay, so you walk down this long pathway that is, to the left and to the right, are a bunch of dorms. I think probably the furthest outside buildings are classrooms, but a lot of the stuff up here— these two big buildings here, and the other two big buildings here and here— are student dorms. There's another checkpoint at the end here, that the gate is completely closed on—this thing right here—And then, you make a right down a really broad walkway, that opens up even further to a really big open cobblestone. It's basically a street but there are no cars anywhere here— or I guess there's a security vehicle here or there. And as you keep heading down east further, you can see it ends in this really nice cul-de-sac, where there is a park, or kind of a grassy area with some trees that looks like its used.

The student affairs building is kinda of attached to that cul-de-sac. There's a really nice fountain in the center that has two individuals, in the middle of the fountain, holding a bowl where the water is coming out. I guess the fountain itself is off in the coming storm, but it is filled with water from the rain, and again, almost gooey water. It's not pleasant to be in.

You head into the building of student affairs, and there's some automated robots mopping the floor, basically. And it's dead in here. The food court is closed. The doors are still open, though, so you're able to get in and be out of the rain at the very least. I think this place was three or four floors. It's just a collection of little offices, and the different clubs have offices in this building.

Mako, you know that there's a bunch of different official dean's offices and the offices of public safety, you know, it's a student affairs building. Or a student center, or whatever you wanna call it. [pause] So what are you doing?

KEITH: Um...

ART: Just get into one of those offices, right?

KEITH: I don't... yeah... Are these offices would be abandoned during the storm, just from "Ah, fuck it. I'm not going to work today" or?

AUSTIN: Yes, this is one of those storms that's like, everyone took a half day. Yeah.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: And it's getting late, it's getting to be night time now. 'Cause it was already getting late when you met up with Lazer Ted. [KEITH: Yeah] It's why the library was closed. Even on an open day, even if there wasn't a storm, this place would be starting to close down at this point.

KEITH: Okay, yeah. I think I should try to tap into one of these office networks.

AUSTIN: Okay. Where are you as a group standing? Or like, where are you hanging out, I guess is the question. And feel free to take creative liberty on what this place is like.

KEITH: I wanna say because it's a student center, there's like *almost* comfortable chairs all over? [AUSTIN laughs] Like, they look comfortable, almost like armchairs, but they still feel like they belong in a school?

AUSTIN: Mhmm.

KEITH: And I think that's just sort of a natural "sit down, and don't be in the rain" place.

AUSTIN: Okay.

KEITH: Especially 'cause they're just scattered about all around the offices.

AUSTIN: Sounds good. Alright, give me a "Jack In". This is a different network than the one you were in before, just a heads up.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Or I guess, "Log In" because a "Jack In" is the other thing.

KEITH: [groans] I failed the last couple of “Log In”s so I’m nervous.

AUSTIN: It’s weird because you have a really good “Synth” score.

KEITH: I do, I just think I got really unlucky, I think.

AUSTIN: Yup.

KEITH: Nope that’s “Jack Out”.... where...

AUSTIN: It’s just “Synth”, It’s just “Synth”

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: There you go, partial success. So you’re in, but choose one: “Passive Trace, ICE is activated, an alert is triggered, advance the active mission clock, your access is restricted.” Again, that’s what you got last time.

KEITH: I’m gonna roll “Console Cowboy”

AUSTIN: Okay. that’s your “Whenever you ‘Log In’...

KEITH: Yeah.

[pause]

AUSTIN: Look at that!

KEITH: That’s a good one.

AUSTIN: I’ll give you three hold on that.

KEITH: Great, I’m gonna— for my—

AUSTIN (over KEITH): You’re going to “Activate Ice” and then “Deactivate Ice”?

KEITH: Yes, yeah. Which I’m starting to feel is kind of a cheat move.

AUSTIN: No, listen. That’s why you have “Console Cowboy”

KEITH: Yeah, yeah. That’s fair. And then...—

AUSTIN: And listen, when you fail both of those, it’s bad. You know?

KEITH: Yes, it is bad.

AUSTIN: Every roll you make, again, is an opportunity for me to fuck you over if you fail it, so...

KEITH: Yeah. (reading to himself) "Increase hold..." (back to Austin) Oh, this is something we never really got into. Part of "Console Cowboy", one of the holds I can use is "Increase your 'hold' over 'Compromise Security' or 'Manipulate Systems' by one." You've never used that as a scale that can slide.

AUSTIN: So the thing with that is like, so let's say you successfully "Manipulate Systems" in this building, right? [KEITH: Okay] Say you rolled a 10, that would give you three "hold" over the sub-systems in this building, which would mean things like, you'd spend a "hold" to lock the doors, you'd spend a "hold" to turn up the heat, you would spend a "hold" [KEITH: Okay.] to download the architectural plans, or something like that. That's how you would be spending multiple "holds". Same thing with the security systems, you know?

KEITH: So, I imagine that the way this building works in *The Matrix*,

AUSTIN: The *Mesh*, please.

KEITH: *The Mesh*, sorry. The Mesh-trix. Is that... I bet the September Institute is really good at Mesh architecture. [AUSTIN: Oh, yeah] In that, not only is it very specifically just the school, when you go in, it's the same thing?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: But also that, they also provide different like— Remember when Limewire had different skins? You could win app skins? [AUSTIN: Yes.] I bet they got a lot of that. Like I bet that there's, you know—

AUSTIN: I think there's that and then, I think there's even— I bet every year there's a competition on campus to see who can best reskin the campus network.

KEITH: Oh yeah. Yeah.

AUSTIN: What do you think—

JACK: But this is also a university, so like it's probably fairly mismanaged as well?

AUSTIN: Ah... No. I think this is like ...

KEITH: The one thing they can do, like, really good?

AUSTIN: There's a school in America called "Saint John's" which is in Annapolis, Maryland—the one I'm thinking of is in Annapolis, Maryland— which has this reputation of being like "A true and proper university in the European style." People learn the classics there, you learn Greek. It's a very like... It has a sorta air of elitism there—

KEITH: At a university?

AUSTIN: (jokingly) Yeah, I know. It's unbelievable.

[KEITH giggles]

AUSTIN: But like, it's not an ivy league school, do you know what I mean? Like it doesn't have that pull that other schools have. But it has this notion of like, "We are a real, prestigious..." you know, "We are really, *truly*, fully committed to learning in way that other schools aren't anymore." And I feel like in the September Institute, especially under Twelfth, has that attitude. So yeah, what's the skin that you choose, Mako?

KEITH: Uh [lightly laughs] I think that Mako's, especially during his school time, was an angsty little jerk and there's graffiti all over the walls in his skin. He has a graffiti skin.

AUSTIN: (amused) Good, good.

ALI: [quiet, high pitched "aw..." of endearment]

KEITH: There is like, all the walls are defiled, but like "sanctioned" defiled, like this is through the school.

AUSTIN: Hey everybody else? You see it. It's really fucking weird. You see the moment he jacks in, the graffiti, as if it was static, comes up over the walls around you.

ART: Oh that's weird.

AUSTIN: It's really weird.

[JACK whines uneasily]

AUSTIN: You feel The Mesh. You *feel*... [pause]. Aria, you felt this before, this feeling of connectivity, it was while you were Jace.

ALI: (contemplatively) Huh...

AUSTIN: So what are you doing, Mako?

KEITH: [sighs] I am going to... Uh, can I call up Larry?

AUSTIN: Sure. He walks in eating a slice of pizza. It's wet with that gross rain [lightly laughs], he doesn't seem to mind.

[various snorts and laughter, KEITH laughs loudly and for almost too long]

AUSTIN (as Larry): How's it goin'?

KEITH (as Mako): Ugh, that's gross.

AUSTIN (as Larry): It's *good*—

KEITH (as Mako): It's wet.

AUSTIN (as Larry): —It's *really* good.

KEITH (as Mako): It's *really* wet.

AUSTIN (as Larry): It adds something! You should try it, you want a piece?

KEITH (as Mako): Okay, is it like Starbucks' chai? Like the water brings out the flavor?

AUSTIN (as Larry): It brings it out, it brings out the flavor.

KEITH (as Mako): I'll try it.

AUSTIN (as Larry): Alright, here.

AUSTIN: He hands you the piece of digital pizza, but he keeps his own digital pizza, like—

KEITH: Right, like it's a copy. He made a copy [lightly laughs].

AUSTIN (over KEITH): Yeah, yeah. It's alright.

KEITH: It's alright, yeah. It's digital pizza, I've had it before.

AUSTIN: You've had digital pizza.

KEITH: Yeah, like it's better than Domino's but it's worse than regular delivery?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Everyone else, you smell the pizza. It's weird.

[JACK snorts]

AUSTIN: Also, you fucking see Larry.

ALI: ...Oh!

AUSTIN: Who is Mako, but like palette swapped a little bit and mirrored.

KEITH: Yeah, it's like—

AUSTIN: He nods at you all,

AUSTIN (as Larry): Hey.

KEITH (as Mako): Hey ... Oh! Did I ever get a chance to explain to you guys what was happening that one time?

AUSTIN (as Larry): Don't worry about it, I took care of it.

KEITH (as Mako): (skeptically) *You* explained it to them?

AUSTIN (as Larry): Ah, more or less.

KEITH (as Mako): Did you make sure they understood?

AUSTIN (as Larry): [sighs] If they don't keep up that's on them, right?

KEITH (as Mako): Did you guys keep up?

ALI (as Aria): We kind of picked it up... There's was two guys...?

AUSTIN (as Larry): Yeah.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah.

(overlapped)

KEITH (as Mako): This is Larry.

AUSTIN (as Larry): Well, I'm Larry.

ART: This is honestly really good.

[Everyone laughs]



ART: And he was mad about it.

AUSTIN (as Larry): So, what up? Why you are on *September*? This place *sucks*.

KEITH (as Mako): It really sucks. I don't like it at *all*, I did kind of miss this skin.

AUSTIN (as Larry): It's cool, it's good.

KEITH (as Mako): It's cool, it's nice to see...

AUSTIN (as Larry): I like your work!

KEITH (as Mako): Thank you. Um... Basically, we wanted to kind of hack into the whole thing— the whole place.

AUSTIN (as Larry): Well, there's a lot of it.

KEITH (as Mako): There is a lot of it.

AUSTIN (as Larry): Hmm... okay. Let me do it.

KEITH (as Mako): Cool.

AUSTIN (as Larry): Where do you wanna start?

KEITH: I would like... [pause]. Can Larry *aid* me? Is that a ...?

AUSTIN: No, but he's just gonna let you do multiple things here.

KEITH: Okay. So can I, uh...

AUSTIN: Where are you looking, I guess is the question. Because there's stuff here that's literally just a research roll, and there's other stuff here that's like, "Oh we have to go deeper into the server and ... y'know, do some stuff."

KEITH: I'm gonna start with a "research" roll.

AUSTIN: Okay. You give me research roll, and Larry will give you a bonus to that, because Larry will literally be... — not a bonus for the roll, but if it's a successful roll, will be able to provide you an additional question.

KEITH: Okay. What is the roll... Okay, "Mind"

AUSTIN: It's "Mind"

KEITH: Right? It's "Mind"

AUSTIN: Other people can help— Oh you don't need it.

KEITH: Great.

AUSTIN: Got a ten, nice work.

KEITH: Thank you.

AUSTIN: Alright, so take "Intel", because you've found some sort of information here, and then you'd be able to ask two— No, *three* of these questions because of Larry. "Where would you find 'blank'? How secure is 'blank'? Who or what is related to 'blank'? Who owned or employed 'blank'? Who or what is 'blank' most valuable to? What is the relationship between 'blank' and 'blank'?"

KEITH: First, where would I find Maryland?

AUSTIN: She has an office in the main stratus lab, which is this *giant* building here. The kinda super large triangle in the south, I guess not the far southwest of this institute, but of this kind of quadrant of the institute. There's the main building for the research fellows and PHD's, all the grad students, all the professors who do active research in relation to strati, do it there. That is a pretty high security building. That said, she isn't offering any classes this semester and she's not listed as having any projects. Like normally, you click on someone's profile on the department site and it says, "Oh, so-and-so is researching these topics right now, they have a book out soon, here are the courses that they're teaching this semester." She doesn't have anything there.

KEITH: Okay...

AUSTIN: It's an old profile picture, and that's it. I guess you don't know it's old, it's not like a different filmstock. But she's... You realize you've never seen her before in your life.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: She has a rosy complexion, kind of tousled brown hair, and is squinting at the photographer as they take the picture—her eyes near shut.

[pause]

KEITH: Hmm.

ART: I don't suppose you have access to information like, "has she logged into her computer—

AUSTIN: Not at this level.

ART: Alright.

AUSTIN: That's the sorta thing you would need to go—

KEITH: Yeah you need to go deeper for that.

AUSTIN: Yes, totally. You know what, here's what I'll give you. She gave a guest lecture three years ago.

KEITH: That's a long time ago.

AUSTIN: Yes.

KEITH: For that to be the most recent public information. What is the relationship between the mysterious disappearance of Maryland and The September Institute?

AUSTIN: So you dig deeper, not like deeper into the system, but you just keep doing research on her—

KEITH: I just keep reading, yeah.

AUSTIN: You find a copy of the school paper that shows that there was an ideological shift between her and Twelfth. She got sick five years ago, and Twelfth took over as a ... What did I call him the other day? I had a really goofy name for him, not "dean"...

ALI: Oh, it was something-regent.

AUSTIN: Yeah, Provost-Regent, and there was a split in terms of what they both thought was... In the school paper it's clear that the school paper doesn't really have all the detail [lightly laughs],

KEITH: Right, yeah. There's like one really grumpton-y student,

AUSTIN: Exactly, who thinks they really understand the high level stuff. They talk to teachers' aids that have worked with both of them and try to figure out what the split is about, and it seems to be about what the fundamental purpose of being a stratus is, whether or not The

September Institute should take part in larger political conversations in the sector. And what that role should look like. There's an ideological spat and she left.

KEITH: Okay, um... Who ...

ART: Maybe a Rigour question?

KEITH: I was thinking of a Rigour question. Just thinking out loud I was gonna to maybe... I don't have a Rigour question nailed down so my next one might have been, "Who owned or employed Twelfth?" but if we all want—

AUSTIN: That's fine, I can answer that. You can ask me the Rigour question too. The answer is not Rigour [lightly laughs].

KEITH: Yeah, who owned or employed Twelfth?

AUSTIN: Twelfth came early on in the setting up of The September Institute, before the planet was called September. The September Institute—

KEITH: so it was August?

AUSTIN: (playing along) It was August still, it was not passed over to September. (back to normal) This planet used to be called Slate II. It's the sequel to Slate, which you immediately know is another planet in this sector, which also helps, maybe, explain why there's also the Slate Mining Division in here. The Slate Mining Cooperative, rather. Not the Division, that's a different company. Twelfth came on as a concern from the original people lived on the planet before The September Institute was set up. He was brought on by Maryland and it says, "Other high ranking officials of The Institute," and he was there as a representative of the people of the planet to make sure The Institute didn't, you know, do anything untoward to the planet, wanted to make sure it maintained the planet's history and didn't interfere with the mining operations. In that time, he actually stopped having those ties to the Slate Mineral Cooperative and started gaining power and sway in the administration. He actually got his PHD from The September Institute, like he started as this business dude, and quickly took to studying and learning things here, and eventually took on an academic role teaching.

KEITH: So he doesn't seem like, necessarily a villain in this.

AUSTIN: Yeah, but—

JACK: (doubtfully) Um...

KEITH: I mean, besides the things that September Institute does that is inherently villainous.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Right, besides us seeing him become villainous on-screen in the past.

ART: Also, come on guys. Every business man in a cyberpunk setting is villain, what are we even talking about here?

[ALI and JACK laugh]

AUSTIN: Pretty much, pretty much.

KEITH: Right. I mean he did cast that off into that different thing [AUSTIN: Mhm.] but... I'm saying he didn't start out as a pawn of an evil...

AUSTIN: No, he was here first. In some ways.

KEITH: Right. Local boy makes good, then takes over.

JACK: Okay—

AUSTIN: So that gives you your research questions.

KEITH: Got it.

AUSTIN: AuDy?

JACK: Oh, so we didn't get a question about Rigour.

AUSTIN: No, you're out of questions.

(overlapped)

ALI: But like, if we're in the mesh are we able—

KEITH: I get more questions later.

JACK: Sorry, Aria?

ALI: Are we able to interact with anything, to do our own...?

AUSTIN: Sure.

KEITH (as Mako): Hey, you guys want a pizza? You guys want a wet pizza?

ALI (as Aria): Actually, kind of. Yeah.

KEITH (as Mako): Here's a wet pizza.

(overlapped)

AUSTIN: You take it and—

KEITH: I'm gonna peel off a slice from the slice.

AUSTIN: You can feel it in your hand, Aria. There's weight there, but it also feels like... You know those things at Spencer's Gifts, with the electricity?

ALI: Oh, yes.

AUSTIN: Like the balls that have the plasma? [ALI: Yeah.] When you touch those, it feels like that. So it's warm and there's this strange pressure. Do you eat it?

ALI: [laughs] No, 'cause it feels really weird in my hand, but I hold it.

KEITH: It looks like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* soggy cheese, not with melted cheese, but with water.

AUSTIN: Yeah, it's gross.

(overlapped)

ART: That's a fucking (intelligible).

KEITH: Yeah it tastes fine, it doesn't taste as wet as it looks.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Yup, yeah.

[KEITH giggles]

ALI: Yeah, she thought it would be a cool thing, but then she touched it and it had that weird sting and she was like:

ALI (as Aria): No, that's okay.

KEITH (as Mako): It's not as wet or as sticky, it's fine.

AUSTIN: As you go to put it down it just disintegrates into pixels.

[ALI whines uneasily]

AUSTIN: Like, it was you saying you were done with it is what trashed it in a way.

[ALI laughs]

KEITH: Was there a paper crumpling up sound?

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yeah, exactly. Yes.

[ALI laughs]

KEITH: It's like weird... ah shit, what is that called? Like, when a calendar in an app looks like a real calendar? Skeuomorphism?

AUSTIN: Skeuomorphism.

KEITH: It's like skeuomorphism, but what it's referencing is just older computers.

AUSTIN: Yes [laughs]. This is the sound of deletion this is what it used to be, so it must still be there. There's an announcement on the loud speakers that says,

AUSTIN (as intercom): The Office of Student Affairs will be closing in fifteen minutes, all students must return to their dormitories.

JACK: The office? September's office?

KEITH: Yeah, yeah. I'm gonna— I can break into that.

AUSTIN: Sure.

JACK: Is there anything anybody else wants to do while we're here?

AUSTIN: So you can literally —

(overlapped)

KEITH: Well, I can do that from here.

ALI: Well, no, no, no, no,

AUSTIN: Yes.

ALI: Well, we said before we would have to dig a little deeper to see if there's any emails sent from her EDU account, or if she's logged in,

AUSTIN: Totally. To do that, you would literally move through this space, towards the server rooms that are here, y'know?

ALI: Okay, we should do that before we disconnect.

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally. No one's disconnecting, I don't think.

KEITH: Yeah, no. I'm gonna stay in this.

AUSTIN: Like Mako was saying before, this place was built for the Mesh. The Mesh is this very strange one-to-one structure here, which means to get to different things— like you do have a range around you, but they can really control the kind of distance the information is available in. to the degree of, “Oh, everyone in this room has access to this information.”

KEITH: Right. It's usually not a concern that like, “Ah, someone might be able to use their head to hack into...” like they have gear for that but it's' a different sort of thing.

AUSTIN: Well, the other thing here that's weird is... So here's the thing that you know, Mako; this thing that I'm describing is true for this one place because this is where parents come to pick up their kids and it's cool for the administration to be like, “This is what the Mesh is like, here it is you can see it! This what your kids are doing.” But in the rest of the school, including in some of the parts of this building—this is one of those cool secrets that kids know after their fourth year here— is there are parts that are physical to virtual relationship, breaks apart, and things become a little more twisty. Making a one-to-one thing is impressive, because it's spectacular to someone who's never seen that before. For people who actually build things in the Mesh, and live in the Mesh the way you and other strati do,

KEITH: It's really inconvenient.

AUSTIN: It's really inconvenient! Like, I don't wanna fucking walk somewhere, and also it's just boring.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Like, you can make *anything*, and you made a student center [lightly laughs]. You could've built them to look like anything and you made some shitty architecture. Cool.

[Everyone laughs]

AUSTIN: For now the stuff you're talking about is still in the reaches of the student center that are walkable. So you start heading... I picture down a little side-hallway, and then down a set of stairs, past another maintenance bot, as you walk past—in the Mesh— has the form of a more cartoonish robot and it just repeats the same message as before of just like, “The student center will be closing in ten minutes.” And eventually you get to the door that the communication servers are behind. The door is—as everyone approaches it— is hot to the touch. It's hot to be near. It's as if there's a fire on the other side.



KEITH: Can I, being less real than me, can I send Larry past that?

AUSTIN: Larry would—

JACK: Oh, wait hang on— oh.

AUSTIN: Uh huh?

JACK: Could I roll “Assess” please?

AUSTIN: Sure. Use “Synth”

JACK: Okay.

KEITH: Is your “Synth” bad, Jack?

AUSTIN: It’s not great.

JACK: My “Synth”’s average.

KEITH: I’m gonna aid.

AUSTIN: Sure, how are you aiding? And what are you doing, AuDY, what are you doing to assess? What’s that look like, physically?

JACK: Are we still at a place where the Mesh is one-to-one?

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: And we can interact with the Mesh at this point, us non-strati? Or do we have to rely on...

AUSTIN: Yes, you can totally interact with the Mesh here. This is super—AuDY, this feels— this isn’t good.

[JACK laughs nervously]

AUSTIN: So normally you are like water in a bottle, right? And sometimes you’re able to pour yourself into different bottles, right? You’re able to open the facet and put yourself into, say, a spaceship or into the facility you were in earlier, right? Where you can still control and feel the camera even from here. This doesn’t feel like you are... You’re not pouring yourself out into a larger container. You’re a bottle of water that’s floating in an ocean, and the way you reach out is to cut yourself open [JACK winces], and there’s no sealing yourself back up after that.

JACK: In retrospect, is it a good idea for Liberty and Discovery to connect to the system?

AUSTIN: I don't know! I'm describing how it feels—To be clear, I'm not describing imminent danger, I'm not showing you the barrel of the gun. I'm talking about what a divine feels in the presence of strati, in an active stratosphere.

JACK: I think I'm partly concerned about Rigour's ability to move through systems, to move through networks? But... No, I think what I'm doing is, I'm trying to reach into the Mesh on the other side of the door.

AUSTIN: Okay, but that will put you at risk here. I wanna be clear, that was the heat. There is heat to try to reach past there and find out what's behind that door. Don't mess up!

JACK: [worried inhale] Ah, Mako's aiding me.

AUSTIN: Okay, Mako roll your aid, and how are you helping?

KEITH: I think I'm helping by trying to scale back the Mesh?

AUSTIN: Oh! I like that.

KEITH: Like, to make it feel less intense?

JACK: I guess this is the equivalent to humans being next to a—

KEITH: Oh!! That's a bad one! That's a bad one to be done!

AUSTIN: Jesus Christ...

KEITH: Those are— I rolled the two lowest possible numbers, together.

AUSTIN: You rolled a one and a two, yeah. Alright, so you rolled a four. For the brief second at least, I almost like it as if you are live coding a new skin for the Mesh in these parts, where you're trying to inject into this space, so this feeling of this mesh doesn't hit him<sup>1</sup> and it's just a door. It's just a door! It's just a door. Just let me open this up, it's just a door. AuDy, give me your "Assess" roll.

JACK: Which is... "Edge"?

AUSTIN: Yup! ... Oh, no. I said it would be "Synth" here, remember?

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<sup>1</sup> AuDy uses they/them pronouns.

KEITH: It's "Synth".

JACK: Crap. Well okay, I just rolled "edge". That doesn't count.

AUSTIN: That does not count.

JACK: That was a six [laughs].

AUSTIN: Make a new roll.

JACK: Okay, here we go

AUSTIN: I'll be the good GM. [pause]. There's a partial success! Which means that, was it you get one from the list?

KEITH: Yeah.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Let's see here...

KEITH: Is this a "GM picks" or?

AUSTIN: No, AuDy will pick. You may hold one at any time to ask any question. So here's what happens: You're like holding the door open—not holding the door open— You opened this gap in the Mesh for AuDy to move safely through, and you go to access the stuff on the other side of that door, AuDy, and then Mako can't hold it open anymore, and it closes, and you're in the Mesh. You're in the ocean. You're the water bottle in the ocean now.

KEITH: Oh, no I did the opposite thing [laughs].

AUSTIN: Yeah, don't hard fail rolls [laughs], it's tough. Try to think what the Mesh here looks like outside of Mako's skin of it.

JACK: Well, it's gotta be something that would be...

AUSTIN: It's whoever's this is. That's the thing, you're on someone else's network, right? You're not in the main student center anymore. You're not getting Sbarro's, right? You're deep in the Mesh here, where the IT people who run this place have stuff.

KEITH: Oh no! You don't wanna see *their* stuff.

AUSTIN: The people here, it's actually really beautiful and mathematical. It's all weird fractals. It's like a garden, but it's a garden that could never really exist because it takes all the geometric fractals that are in flowers, and then zooms in on them and broadcasts them around you. There's this extra sensory feeling of everything being much, much larger than it is, because you have perfect knowledge of its composition. Like, you don't just see the red on the rose, you see the shape of the rose down to a cellular level whenever you focus on it. It's beautiful but also deeply overwhelming. What are you looking for here, what's the "Assess" you're making?

JACK: (amused) Well, what I was trying to do was... I trying to work out what we should we aware of in entering this space, and I completely goofed that one.

AUSTIN: No, you succeeded. You're safe, you're not getting hurt. It's just that you're cut off from the rest of the squad for this second.

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: So, which question here for "Assess" do you want?

JACK: Can I ask, "What do I notice despite an effort to conceal it?"

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally. There is... Actually, you know what? I'm gonna actually show you. Let's take you back to the clocks— No, no, no. You're good, you're good. But Keith did fail that roll.

KEITH: Mhmm. Whoops.

AUSTIN: It's fine. It's totally fine, everything's good. So, there's one little bit of the garden that is very clearly being drawn in as you look at it. What you immediately learn is this thing built itself up to put you at ease. This version of the Mesh.

JACK: (sarcastic) Oh, well, that was successful.

AUSTIN: Yeah, until you caught the edge and saw... just plain porous concrete, and then the flowers sprout up out from it, as if to say, "Oh, no, no, no. Sssh— Everything's fine. You're good, don't worry. No one sees you. You're safe and alone."

[JACK sighs]

KEITH: "And look how nice they are!"

AUSTIN: "Ah, so pretty."

JACK: Okay. I feel we should be... What am I— Well, this suggests that something is present.

AUSTIN: That is what I'm trying to communicate, yeah.

JACK: Yeah. So I'm gonna call out to the group that there's somebody in here.

AUSTIN: Okay. They can hear you say that, totally.

JACK: So they're on the other side of the door—

AUSTIN: There's a physical door, yeah. Yup. You can open that door if you want.

JACK: We're at the hot door.

AUSTIN: It is not hot from your side.

JACK: I think I'm gonna let them make a hard move [laughs].

AUSTIN: Are you gonna let the rest of the team try to get in, you're saying?

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Okay.

KEITH: If it's not hot from your side, can you just open it for us?

JACK: Well, would the door... Wait, is it very hot, Austin?

AUSTIN: On which side?

JACK: On their side. Would it hurt them? 'Cause I can just open it—

AUSTIN: Yes. Well, it would not just hurt them to open it. Mako knows that that heat is representative of something else.

(overlapped)

KEITH: That's like ice or a firewall,

JACK: Is Mako standing close?

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: Okay, I'm going to open it and let them in. My thinking here is that the number one thing that Liberty and Discovery is most afraid of, at this point, is Rigour.

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: And I doubt Rigour would make a garden.

AUSTIN: Right. Opening the door will have an effect. From the outside, it will have multiple effects. From the inside, Mako, you know you can't just open it and no one will notice. This is the same situation as being in Kinko's earlier, right?

KEITH: Right.

(overlapped)

AUSTIN: You could make roll to try and disable this—

KEITH: If I roll to (unintelligible).

AUSTIN: Hm?

KEITH: I actually still have two hold from "Console Cowboy",

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: I could just use to prevent an "ICE" or prevent an alert from being triggered.

AUSTIN: Yes, totally.

KEITH: Okay.

(overlapped)

JACK: Yeah, why not?

AUSTIN: If one of those things happen, yeah.

JACK: Okay.

KEITH: I think first, what I want to do, instead of just waiting to see what happens, I think I'm proactively going to "Compromise Security"? is it "Manipulate Systems"?

AUSTIN: No, this would be "Melt ICE", you're facing "ICE" here.

KEITH: Okay. That's "Edge" so hold on,

AUSTIN: Which is, "When you attempt to evade, destroy, or disable an activated ICE construct, roll 'edge'."

KEITH: Um, not very good with "Edge" so, nevermind. I'm not going to do that.

AUSTIN: Okay.

KEITH: I'm just gonna let whatever happens happen [light laugh]. I'm just gonna let it be disabled, instead of rolling and failing.

AUSTIN: So, which are you doing? Are you opening the door, or are you letting AuDy open the door?

KEITH: I'm letting AuDy open the door.

AUSTIN: Okay. So, AuDy, you open the door. The second you open the door there's a shockwave that moves physically through the hallway, but I'm guessing, Mako, you're going to cut that thing off.

KEITH: I'm gonna— yeah.

AUSTIN: I almost like you literally making a scissor-snapping? [KEITH: Yeah.] Physical motion? As if to cut across—

KEITH: Yeah, I cross my arms in an “X” and I go [swoosh sound].

AUSTIN: God, what a teen. Um... The shockwave stops in place. —Or it reverberates backwards back into the room. So you have—

KEITH: I just wanna tell... I wanna tell everybody how cool that was.

AUSTIN: (whispers in disbelief) Oh my god...

KEITH (as Mako): Wasn't that? That was really cool.

AUSTIN (as Larry): Yeah, that was super cool.

AUSTIN: says Larry.

(overlapped)

ALI (as Aria): Good job, Mako.

KEITH (as Mako): Thanks, Larry.

ART: (exasperated) Oh my god.

KEITH (as Mako): Thank you.

AUSTIN: He high-fives you— He puts his hand up for the high-five.

KEITH: Nice. I reply.

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: Wait, you don't high-five him? You just say, "Nice"?

KEITH: No, no. My reply is another high-five.

AUSTIN: Oh okay, good. Good.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So you all head into the room, and as you head back in, the garden gives away to Keith's— er, to Mako's skin, which is the physical reality but with graffiti everywhere and sketches on the wall and—

KEITH (as Mako): Is this making you guys uncomf— Like is the graffiti making things more tense for you guys? 'Cause I can switch this up.

ART (as Cass): That's absolutely not what's making this tense.

KEITH (as Mako): Well like, if it was something more fun, like if I did this—

KEITH: And then I switch it to like, uh. Like a Snapchat filter where everything looks like it's hand-drawn.

JACK (as AuDy): The existence of your university is deeply unsettling.

[AUSTIN laughs]

ALI (as Aria): This is a little weird. Mako, were you mad when you were here? What is all of this?

KEITH (as Mako): Uh yeah, this place is bullshit—

ALI (as Aria): (sympathetically) Aw...

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, so I made everything look like it was— It's okay. The school said it fine, all of these have to go through the school. I think that they understand it's a proper outlet for... y'know. Just a student's natural frustration with the system.

AUSTIN (as intercom): All students—



KEITH (as Mako): —Like the literal— with the literal system.

JACK: Uh oh.

AUSTIN (as intercom): Please return to your dormitories. The student center will be closed in five minutes.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, this robot thing that's counting down, we gotta hurry 'cause it's not— They don't fuck around with this whole "closed" thing. Trust me, when you get caught... being somewhere that's closed they get really frustrated with you.

[AUSTIN laughs]

KEITH (as Mako): And they say you're wasting your potential.

[AUSTIN and JACK chuckle]

JACK: What's in the room?

AUSTIN: Servers and stuff, right? It's physical— It's a bunch of computers stacked on top of each other. There's a calendar on the wall, there's, y'know, some cold coffee no one threw away after they were done with it.

KEITH: Oh, so it wasn't cold brewed? It was just gone sour?

(overlapped)

AUSTIN: No, just room temperature—

ART: Wait, is that real coffee or is that construct—

AUSTIN: No it's soy caffe. It's not real coffee.

ART: No, I meant like, if I went over and grabbed it and took it out of this building, am I holding something?

AUSTIN: You can't tell. You can't tell from looking at it.

KEITH: That's not real coffee.

AUSTIN: It might be. People work here.

[JACK sighs]

KEITH: If it was real coffee it'd be cold by now. It's lukewarm, which is the lowest that digital coffee can go.

AUSTIN: [laughs] (amused) 'Cause there's just natural heat in the digital world.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: You can't get anything to absolute zero in the digital world.

KEITH: Mhmm. And also it's just like... The digital world can't present itself as anything less than "minimally satisfactory" unless you specifically tell it to.

[AUSTIN and JACK give an amused chuckle]

AUSTIN: Alright, so what are you all doing here? You're in.

KEITH: I am going to... Am I close enough to access these computers now?

AUSTIN: Yeah, yeah. You're in. Yeah totally. This will be a research roll.

KEITH: Um... before doing a research roll, could I get ... deeper?

AUSTIN: You're deeper.

KEITH: Oh, okay.

AUSTIN: This is deeper.

KEITH: I thought I would have to do an additional manipulate systems check.

AUSTIN: He [sic] got through with your help and opened the door for you.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: What you would've had done is melt that ICE and manipulate systems to open the door. [KEITH: Okay.] But he [sic] just got in and opened it for you.

KEITH: Okay! Then I'm going to do that research roll—

AUSTIN: Let me make sure that it's the right— I think it's probably still "Mind" but I'm just going to double check. Also, remember you get a bonus on research.

KEITH: I do, I have "Take one ongoing research when I'm in a secure database"

AUSTIN: This is a secure database, is it?

KEITH: I have a plus one. Um... Eight.

AUSTIN: Okay so, that means you get two. One from your move and one from your program.

KEITH: Okay. And, sorry, the reason why we're looking for Rigour information is to sell to Ibex?

AUSTIN: That's like part of what your mission is, right?

KEITH: Right. Yeah, I wasn't sure what we were doing with that information 'cause I don't know... I think we decided against trying to even let Rigour know that we're here, or do anything Rigour related?

JACK: No. Well... I think somewhere deep in its heart—if it has a heart—Liberty and Discovery has some conception of, "This is a rematch,"

AUSTIN: (sarcastically) Ha ha ha...

JACK: I think they probably also know that the likelihood of it being a rematch is so... y'know. Like, ants don't get to have rematches against gorillas. It doesn't work like that.

AUSTIN: It strikes Liberty and Discovery briefly, that there must have already been a previous rematch, at least once.

JACK: [chuckles] Yeah...oh boy.

AUSTIN: There's a brief moment where you beam, with pride for something you can't quite remember.

[pause]

JACK: None of this is good. [sighs] None of this is good at all. Is Mako able to determine who else is in this system? Who might it been constructing the garden?

AUSTIN: Umm.... Maybe.

KEITH: I just assumed that the garden was like a thing that the system does, but the—

JACK: No, I think that was authorship.

KEITH: Okay. Like someone was doing that in real time?

AUSTIN: Someone was definitely doing that in real time. Someone or *something* was doing that in real time.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: That was what I was trying to communicate for sure.

KEITH: Okay. I guess I'll... Where would I find the... person still left in this system?

AUSTIN: They are in... You blink for a second, and the whole place is again reskinned, and you see the wireframe of the network, of wires and things? And for a bit, it leaves this building and then it becomes a *jungle* of— It looks like someone took a pen and just scribbled all over the place, because again, the rest of this network is not clean the way the student affairs building is. But, you could follow this light that's moving through this scribbled mess of wireframe, and eventually it lands in the strati lab. It is coming from the office of Twelfth.

KEITH: Okay. Um. Who or what is... Maryland most valuable to— Oh no, I wanna ask a Rigour question. Who owned or employed Rigour?

(overlapped)

JACK: What? [laughs]

ALI: (incredulously) What?

[JACK and ART wheeze]

AUSTIN: There's no mention of Rigour in this— Wait. That's not true. I just remembered something from *forever* ago.

KEITH: Great.

JACK: Hang on. (amused) What question was that?

KEITH: (enunciating) Who owned or employed Rigour?

[JACK quietly laughs]

AUSTIN: There's actually a really weird answer to this question.

KEITH: Great. Listen you guys, don't scoff until it doesn't work.

[JACK gives an amused huff]

AUSTIN: There is... The walls get projected with video. It opens with snow, and the camera points down, and you can see a *massive* hole into the ground. The people watching us at home know this is the planet Ionius. And Natalya drifts into view.

AUSTIN (as Natalya): It's been a while, Ibex, but... there's something you need to know. We found something here, on Ionius, and I think you might be one of the only people in this system who can help stop it. It's Rigour. If you don't know what that means... ask Righteousness. You need to find out, and you need to mobilize. Whatever other plans you have, can them. This is bigger, trust me. I don't know—[sighs]. I don't know how to get in contact with you, but my sources say that you have some control over September, so I'm sending the message there. It's *imperative* that you reach out to me. I'm sending the same message elsewhere and I hope someone gets in contact, but... if no one does, soon... it'll be too late. You know, the first time they beat this thing, *trillions* of people died. That's what a victory looks like.

AUSTIN: She looks over her shoulder.

AUSTIN (as Natalya): I have to go. I hope to hear from you soon.

AUSTIN: And she reaches out and touches something, and the message goes away. You see that file arrived to, like... basically, "ibex@september.edu" (amused huff). Uh—

[KEITH laughs]

AUSTIN: And you see it was caught by Twelfth— Like Twelfth had a macro set up to intercept any communication coming in for Ibex, and Twelfth broadcast out that message in the direction of Ionius. And when you go touch what that message is... AuDy, you like— It's this *smell* of incredibly delicious. I don't know what divines smell like? But it's just like, "Oh, I could be twice of what I am now. I could be infinitely powerful!" It's just like something... You feel like maybe you now have a better understanding of what the program here is. In that, it isn't just giving people the language to communicate with divines and to hack them, but it is accessing the *most personlike* part of the divine. The most sentient, the most animalistic part of these artificial beings, and it's able to leverage that, and Twelfth fucking called him here. So in that sense—

JACK: [exhales]. Hey remember, Ali, when we were like "Twelfths not a villain!"?

[ALI sighs sheepishly]

KEITH: Yeah. —Uh I made a mistake, sorry. For rules oriented listeners, the reason I'm getting two questions is 'cause I still have Larry hanging around—

AUSTIN: No, no, no. It's 'cause you have that program, which gives you plus one hold on research rolls inside of secure systems.

KEITH: Oh, okay. I was thinking this was a “Larry” influence thing.

AUSTIN: Larry would let you make another one here, totally.

KEITH: Okay!

AUSTIN: Larry gives you a bonus on any of these sorts of rolls, of like, “always holds one ‘cause— oh, no always. On a success hold an additional one, because Larry can be somewhere else accessing other information.

KEITH: Okay. Then... What is the relationship between Twelfth and Rigour?

AUSTIN: I mean, I don’t wanna answer that because I just did.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: I think.

KEITH: I guess I was looking for more, but if you don’t wanna give me more than that’s— If that’s all that the system has,

AUSTIN: That’s all *this* system has. This is like the communications network stuff, yes.

KEITH: Okay. Anybody have any suggestions? I have like a couple ideas, but I feel like a lot of them have been partially answered already?

(overlapped)

ART: We could pivot to... Maryland?

KEITH: Does anyone want to commit?

ALI: Yeah, we still don’t know where she is.

AUSTIN: Yes, totally.

ART: Like, how secure is wherever she is? What is the relationship between—

(overlapped)

KEITH: Well, I’ve asked—

AUSTIN: You can even ask—

ART: —September and the outside world?

AUSTIN: You can ask the same questions as you asked before, and get different answers now, 'cause you're—

KEITH: Yeah, because I'm in a different— I mean, I'm in a more secure system. 'Cause before it was "Where would I find Maryland? In her office! Where she hasn't been in three years!" So, yeah. Where would I find Maryland?

AUSTIN: I want you to follow me here really quick.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: So, you're here now, right?

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: You can come up to here. You get this map view below you, on the ground, and it zooms out, and it goes up to here... and then it pings again, further west, out towards the suburbs, and then south near the library, and then to the west you notice a little path that darts out into the woods.

KEITH and JACK: Oh!

(overlapped)

JACK: Oh, look at that!

AUSTIN: Further, further down towards—

KEITH: We were very close earlier! (JACK: Yeah!)

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: —and then over to the side... and there's a square. Out in the middle of the trees.

ART: Ah yeah, there sure is!

ALI: Look at that.

KEITH: There sure is a square there.

AUSTIN: Sure is.

JACK: Austin! Austin! You Jonathan Blow's *The Witness*'d us!

[AUSTIN, ALI, ART and KEITH bursts into laughter]

AUSTIN: Whomp! (amused) I literally did, 'cause like look at the map! It's a fucking— It is literally a *Witness* puzzle. It starts with the same circle thing [laughs] as in *The Witness*. That's the worst— I'm the worst person! I didn't even realize I was doing it!

KEITH: Ah, it's okay. It's what roleplaying games are.

AUSTIN: Ugh... god...

JACK: It is kinda cool it was there all along. I'm up for that.

KEITH: Yeah. Imagine if one of us had gone like "Hey, what's that square down there?"

AUSTIN: I would have totally given that to you. Absolutely I would've. I would've said "Ah yeah, that's a weird building. That's strange. That might be worth checking out." That's why I put it there. (JACK: Huh...) It's why it's on the map, and not just a thing I just drew in now.

JACK: Well, crap.

ALI: That answers that!

[JACK gives an amused wheeze]



KEITH: Um, So...

AUSTIN: When that information comes up, it is also clearly Twelfth's dossier. And there is a camera shot of a nice little... bigger than hut, it's a nice cabin. It's a nice—

KEITH: A hutch!

AUSTIN: —cabin in the woods.

KEITH: Wait, is a hutch smaller than a hut?

AUSTIN: Yeah, a hutch is a thing that you have in your house.

KEITH: Yeah, it's like where you put—

ART: Your china.

KEITH: Yeah, It's maybe big enough to put that gun in from earlier.

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: You still haven't seen *Fargo*, yet?

AUSTIN: I have not seen *Fargo* yet. I really need to. I haven't seen the show "*Fargo*" I've seen the movie "*Fargo*".

JACK: This is like the cabin at the end of season 1, right?

AUSTIN: Alright, I'll keep that in mind.

AUSTIN (as intercom): Two minutes until the student center closes.

JACK: Let's go! Let's go! [laughs].

KEITH: Do you guys wanna go to where it was implied where Twelfth is, or? That's not the student center, so.

JACK: No, I feel that that's probably a good idea. Austin, there's no— I mean... While I'm still in this system, is there any way I can just install a Liberty and Discovery patch inside September's student affairs mesh?

AUSTIN: (worried) Hohh..

JACK: This isn't even for mechanical reasons. This is just for narrative, like I'm a divine in a building which kills divines.

AUSTIN: Yeah, I mean. Remember, narrative reasons are mechanical reasons in *Apocalypse World*.

JACK: Oh, sure.

AUSTIN: Yeah, you could do that. That would be—

KEITH: I would—

AUSTIN: —Opening yourself up... You... hoo.....

KEITH: I don't know if that's a good idea—

AUSTIN: Is this Liberty and Discovery wanting to do the things it has promised itself it would do? Is this continually broadening your horizons, looking for hidden things, and cultivating saplings?

JACK: Yeah, this is super what it is, right?

KEITH: I don't— Wait

.

AUSTIN: Give me a "Synth" roll.

KEITH: Hold on, what would be the outcome of this?

AUSTIN: It would be... It's a lot of things, right? Some of them you would know immediately, some of them would be a thing that would slowly take hold over the next decade of the September Institute's life.

KEITH: I don't think this is a good idea.

(overlapped)

AUSTIN: I don't think he's [sic] telling you.

JACK: I'm not telling you that I'm doing it.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: I mean, this is Keith saying to Jack,

ALI: Yeah.

KEITH: I don't think this is a good idea.

AUSTIN: That's not how this works, so...

KEITH: (agreeing) No.

JACK: Look, we've established stuff about divines in the past.

AUSTIN: Mhmm.

KEITH: Yeah, they all suck.

Art: Yeah, they all suck.

JACK: (amused) Yup, yup! Yup!

AUSTIN: Alright, you rolled an eight. Is this an active thing— Is AuDy aware that Liberty and Discovery is doing this? Is this a *conscious* decision?

JACK: Uh, no. This is just Liberty and Discovery doing what Liberty and Discovery does.

AUSTIN: You take a step, and when you lift up your foot, you look back, and there's a little pine sapling where your foot just was.

JACK: [inhales] Inside the building?

AUSTIN: Inside— Well, it's in the mesh, right? It's in the garden that you're leaving, and the flowers move away from it. And, you look a little closer, and it's not just a little pine *sapling*. It's a massive pine tree, that is surrounded by smaller pine trees in micro form. You look very closely for a second, with the same focus that you brought to bear with that rose, and there's movement there.

[pause]

AUSTIN: And then you walk away. This is a backdoor, effectively, that you can walk back into without having to log in. For now. It's other things, also. Just not quite yet.

[JACK chuckles]

AUSTIN: I am going to advance a clock, though.

ALI: Why...

JACK: (amused) I feel like there's a pretty good reason why. Which is divines are just— Divines are just horrifying creatures trying to do their thing.

AUSTIN: I going to advance a clock, and going to reveal it. One second...

JACK: Alert! Oh that one's a bad one. Yeah, that's a real bad one.

ALI: Wow... I know what this is!

KEITH: That might be Twelfth, that's my—

AUSTIN: Boop!

KEITH: Oh, that's a—

[JACK laughs]

ALI: I figured that's what that was, perfect!

JACK: It just says "Rigour", except it says it inside two square brackets—

AUSTIN: I can undo that.

(overlapped)

JACK: —and nothing else.

ART: And there's still question marks?

JACK: I quite like that.

ART: I thought it was going to be "Rigour" and a second thing.

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: No, no, I got rid of the question mark.

[JACK chuckles]

ALI: For the audience, Rigour is now at three alerts.

AUSTIN: Three alerts, out of six.

ALI: Twenty-one hundred.

KEITH: This is the last one that doesn't do anything, right?

AUSTIN: Correct. I mean It does something in the sense that I'm going to illustrate this, which is... I think the thing [laughs], it calls out again and it says,

AUSTIN (as intercom): All students must be in their dormitories in the next minute. And they can never leave.

[pause]

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: And you hear the sound of the gate, at the outside of the September Institute, slowly scraping closed. Aria—

KEITH: Was that? Jack, did you do that?

AUSTIN: No.

ALI (as Aria): We should log off.

ART (as Cass): Yeah, let's get out of here.

AUSTIN: Aria.

ALI: (hesitantly) Yeah? Yes, Austin?

AUSTIN: And Mako.

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: As you come out of the student affairs building, you spot a familiar figure, leaning against the fountain. He's a very attractive man, long trench coat, who is currently on a phone, being as nondescript and inconspicuous as you can in a middle of a pouring rainstorm, and in the middle of an institute that he is certainly not supposed to be at. It is Paisley Moon.

ALI: Oh!

KEITH: (unsure) Um..... Glad... he... confused? To be here?

ALI: That's weird.

[JACK laughs]

ALI: Can we—

KEITH (as Mako): Hey Paisley!

ALI: I'm going to approach him.

AUSTIN: He like holds up his hand—

ALI: Wait, wait, wait.

AUSTIN: Mako called out.

KEITH: Yeah, I called out.

ALI: Have we disconnected yet?

AUSTIN: Oh yeah, you're outside now, I mean—

ALI: Oh, okay.

AUSTIN: There's not... [chuckles nervously]. There's no disconnecting in the September Institute *really*. It's just you're not in that place anymore.

ALI: Okay.

KEITH: And since we're outside there's really nothing to display.

AUSTIN: The visualizer isn't on. I think Mako can still be on the network. He's still in the Wi-Fi, right?

KEITH: Yeah, I'm sure I'm still logged into the lower level.

AUSTIN: The thing that shows the visualizer to just random people isn't on in here.

ALI: Okay.

AUSTIN: Or out here, right now anyway. Paisley gives you a *look* and holds up his hand.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): One second.

KEITH (as Mako): That's not—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (on phone) That's what I'm saying—... no, this is bad. I think you d— Yeah, it's fine. It's—

KEITH (as Mako): (to the Chime) I can't believe he just one second'd us in a rainstorm on a planet he's not supposed to be on.

ALI (as Aria): I don't know what's going on...

AUSTIN (as Paisley): I'm so sorry. I'm very busy right now, I'm in the middle of a thing... It's, it's—

ALI (as Aria): Paisley, what are you doing here?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Ah, just getting some work done.

KEITH (as Mako): Like, what are you doing here, though?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): What are *you* doing here?

KEITH (as Mako): We're—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): You guys, let's get out of the rain, come on.

AUSTIN: and he like, points over to— [chuckles]. There's a little cafe over here, that is *definitely* closed, but he starts walking towards it.

KEITH: Can I "Assess"? ... Who's— Can someone aid me? I would like someone to aid me here.

(overlapped)

ART: Yeah, (unintelligible).

ALI: Yeah, I would like to!

AUSTIN: What's that look like?

KEITH: Can it just be, like, really intensely looking him up and down?

AUSTIN: Okay.

ALI: Yeah, I feel like me and Mako have an understanding of his tone of voice and body language... Okay, I'm going to aid Mako.

KEITH: Alright, please do good because I—

ALI: Two d6 plus one?

AUSTIN: Two d6 plus whatever your—

ALI: It's an eight.

AUSTIN: Okay, that's one. Add one to your roll, Mako.

KEITH: Um... Alright, fingers crossed! Zero "Edge" let's see.

AUSTIN: Boom!

ALI: Wahoo! [clap].

KEITH: Alright, great, awesome.

AUSTIN: Alright. So, he turns and starts to walk away and you successfully "Assess". What are your questions?

KEITH: Uh... Hold on let me pull up the list real quick... Um...

ART: Remember you could hold—

AUSTIN: You gain three hold again, you could hold these— Yes. As Art says, you can hold on to them.

KEITH: Okay. "What do I notice despite an effort to conceal it?"

AUSTIN: Um... Hmm.

KEITH: I'll tell you where I am now. I'm skeptical that is this the real Paisley Moon.

AUSTIN: He's not in the Mesh. Something is keeping him out of the Mesh.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: —Is a thing that he would not like you to know.

KEITH: Okay. What's—[laughs]. I'm just going to ask here.

KEITH (as Mako): What's keeping you out of the Mesh?



ALI: Wait, he's in the Mesh but he was talking on the phone?

(overlapped)

KEITH: No, he's out of the Mesh. He can't go in the Mesh.

AUSTIN: He's not in the Mesh.

ALI: Okay.

AUSTIN: He's not— All of you are in this weird, hyper-dense Mesh cloud, because it's the September Institute and that's how they do. But, he is somehow not—

KEITH: We all chuck clouds.

AUSTIN: —He is like, protected from it. He looks back at the rest of you and is like, gives you all a... eyebrow raise, tilts head down,

AUSTIN (as Paisley): None of us should be in the Mesh in a place like that. Now, let's get inside, it's raining.

KEITH: Um... "Who or what is my biggest threat in this situation?"

AUSTIN: What's the situation? That you're describing?

KEITH: The situation is we are in the same building, presumably, as Twelfth—

AUSTIN: You're outside, remember.

KEITH: Uh, on the same campus as Twelfth, [AUSTIN: Yeah.] Who does seem to know about our presence and, mysteriously, Paisley Moon is here.

AUSTIN: God, like what isn't a threat to you here? I think the biggest threat is probably Twelfth. No, the biggest threat is probably the person who shot you before, whoever that is.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: And, y'know. Yeah... But there are a bunch of threats here.

KEITH: Okay. "What potential complication do I need to be wary of?"

AUSTIN: Paisley Moon works for a lot of different people.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: That is not me saying that he necessarily works for Twelfth, That is not me saying— but that is a complication that jumps into Mako's head, right? [KEITH: Right.] The last interaction here you had with Paisley was when you gave him that virus, because Cass made that decision.

JACK: Nice one, Cass.

KEITH: Right, and I did agree with Cass at the time.

AUSTIN: Mhmm.

ART: And now we need a favor, and look who it is! the person we didn't fuck over last time! Nice going, Cass, Indeed.

KEITH: Good—

JACK: I don't think this is a favor, I think a monster just walked up to us and gone, "Everything is good here. You don't need to be getting Maryland." I'm—

ALI: No, he's fine. He's cute, it's fine.

KEITH: I.... feel like Austin would have given more of a hint of that, maybe.

AUSTIN: He's holding the cafe door open.

JACK: No! See, this was a closed cafe!

KEITH (as Mako): We gotta get Twelfth and this is weird. You're being weird.

(overlapped)

JACK: No, don't say that to him! No, don't— No, don't say that to him!

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Get Twelfth? What are you doing? Don't say that here!

KEITH (as Mako): Wait hold on—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): That's how you get them on— Hmm.

KEITH (as Mako): (reassuringly) I'm good at this.

AUSTIN: He holds his head in his hands.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Mako,

KEITH (as Mako): Why are you doing that?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Boy, you— You're going to get yourself in trouble.

KEITH (as Mako): Well, *duh*.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): I want to talk to you, in a place that isn't out there.

KEITH (as Mako): Okay, fine.

AUSTIN: [amused scoff] It took nothing, okay. [laughs] Good.

ALI (as Aria): We were gonna leave the campus, can you follow us off campus?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): No, I need to be here.

KEITH (as Mako): Why?

JACK (as AuDy): Do you know a way to get us out through the closing door once it's closed?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Hmm.... It'll open back up.

KEITH (as Mako): It said— It said it'll never do that.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): *What?*

KEITH (as Mako): It said, uh, "Students, you should be in your dormitories... and you can never leave," Is what it said.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): [confused silence] ... One second.

AUSTIN: And then he looks up at the sky— like, not up in the sky, but he's accessing something, clearly.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Wait, let me— No. That didn't— I'll play it back.

AUSTIN: And he hits a button on his phone, and over speaker it plays back the sound of the rain, and then he's scrubbing through the last five minutes of sound that came out of the student center. And when it calls out it says, y'know, "All of the students need to be back in your dorms in one minute." It does not include the "and you can never leave" thing.

KEITH (as Mako): You know how you're not in the Mesh? I think that's why you didn't hear that full thing.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): ... Alright...

KEITH (as Mako): 'Cause we definitely heard like, "You'll never leave." It was very ominous, it was like haunted-house-style creepy.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Alright. If you gotta go, you gotta go, that's fine. I have work to do. I was gonna get you some coffee, get you warmed up, but that's fine.

ART: I'll sit with Paisley!

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Good luck!

ALI (as Aria): No, no, no—

AUSTIN: Yeah, you can totally sit with Paisley.

[ALI (as Aria) scoffs]

ART (as Cass): I'll catch up with you guys.

KEITH (as Mako): You'll catch up with us? That's weird, why are you being— why— What?

ART (as Cass): It's fine. It'll be fine.

JACK: Paisley's with—

ART (as Cass): We'll be fine.

JACK: Paisley's worked with the Rapid Evening in the past. Right?

AUSTIN: He's worked with a lot of people in the past. It's as likely— Yes, he's worked with the Rapid Evening in the past. It's as likely that he... He's worked with the COUNTER/Weight's Angels in the past. You gave it to him, who— No, wait. Did he not? He worked for...

ALI: No, no, no, no. He was working—

AUSTIN: Because, no. Jamil wanted to give it to COUNTER/Weight's Angels. The virus.

ALI: Yes.

AUSTIN: He wanted to...

KEITH: Give it back to the Apostolosians.

AUSTIN: Is that right?

ALI: Yes.

AUSTIN: Yes, which is why Cass sided with him and did that.

JACK: What are the odds that...

AUSTIN: But, he has probably has worked for the Rapid Evening at one point, [laughs] I just wanna be clear. That's just the way.

JACK: I wanna be clear that I'm not making a move here. What are the odds that he was previously aware of Rigour?

AUSTIN: Hmm. Low?—

KEITH (as Mako): Do you know Rigour's here?

AUSTIN: —Very low.

[JACK sighs defeatedly]

AUSTIN (as Paisley): What? No, I don't know if there's any riggers here, I don't think. There's not really much of a war here, so. Eh, maybe there's some construction—

KEITH (as Mako): No, no, no, no, oh god no. You've misunderstood— I'm sorry. You've misunderstood.

ALI (as Aria): [groans] Mako... He's not gonna understand— Paisley, you're in danger here, we should—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (offended) I'm in danger? I am a professional.

(overlapped)

ALI (as Aria): I know, but—

KEITH (as Mako): I—okay. Real quick rundown: The divines—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): How are you doing anyway, Aria? It's been a minute.

ART (as Cass): Everyone, *shut up!* This isn't a conversation we can have in public. Either get inside and talk, or get off campus. But it has to happen fucking *now!*

[ALI laughs]

ART (as Cass): *Holy shit* you're going to get us all killed!

[AUSTIN, ALI and JACK laugh]

AUSTIN: What do people do?

KEITH: I'll go inside— I'll go inside but I'm pouty about it.

KEITH (as Mako): (mumbling) —fucking tell me not to—

JACK (over KEITH): Oh my god, I'm really worried—[laughs]

KEITH (as Mako): —say what's on my fucking mind, god damn it...

[ALI laughs]

JACK: I'm really worried about Orth and Natalya, who are— we know they're probably—

AUSTIN: (amused) You keep on saying Natalya, Jacqui.

ALI: (through laughter) It's not Natalya!

AUSTIN: I'm worried about Natalya too, but I can tell you it's not going well for Natalya.

JACK: Okay, I'm really worried for Orth and Jacqui.

JACK (as AuDy): Look, Cass. Maybe this is when we split the party [laughs].

AUSTIN: It sounds like AuDy wants to go.

ART (as Cass): Alright! I'll catch up with you, I promise.

[JACK laughs]

KEITH: I'm really curious what Cass has to say to Paisley.

AUSTIN: Alright! AuDy, what are you doing?

JACK: I'm gonna make for the gate!

AUSTIN: Alright. Aria, what are you doing?

ALI: Um, I'm going to go inside with Paisley.

AUSTIN: Okay.

KEITH: Wait, we're leaving Jack by himself?

ART: Someone go with AuDy!

AUSTIN: AuDy, you make it out—

(overlapped)

ALI: Alright, I'll go—

KEITH: Can we do rock, paper, scissors for it?

AUSTIN: Wait, wait, wait. One second. How is this being decided, in the rain? Is Cass— Cass you just shouted "No, someone go with AuDy,"

ART: Yeah.

ALI: Yes.

KEITH: I put my finger on my nose— Mako puts his finger on his nose!

AUSTIN: Paisley gives Aria puppy-dog eyes.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Come on, it's hot coffee.

(overlapped)

ALI (as Aria): (unintelligible)

KEITH (as Mako): Ugh, I'm going with AuDy.

[ALI and JACK laugh]

ALI: (through laughter) Okay, okay.

JACK (as AuDy): I'll be fine, I'll be fine! I have a— I have a piping bag of goo that I can use to heal myself.

AUSTIN: He [sic] does have that.

ALI: This is the plan: Cass and Aria go inside, and Mako and AuDy [laughs].

AUSTIN: Okay.

ALI: I guess?

JACK: Okay, we're following the plan, we're following the... plan!

KEITH: Alright.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Mako, you sure you don't wanna come in?

KEITH (as Mako): [sighs, groans] but, like—

ALI (as Aria): Why are you acting like this?

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, I'll come in.

AUSTIN: He gives you the "I wanna talk to you, but I can't just talk to you" look.

KEITH (as Mako): No, you're— Yeah, I'll come inside, I was being unreasonable.

ART: [sighs] Oh my god, we're the worst criminals.

[ALI laughs]

KEITH: Listen, this is a complicated, "Will they/won't they/will the other ones"...

AUSTIN: [chuckles] AuDy, you get out. You're going, I'm guessing?

JACK: Yeah. Mhmm.

AUSTIN: Okay. There's a security guard who gives you a little wave,

AUSTIN (as security guard): Get home soon, sir. It seems very— [sighs] It's bad out there. I hear there's another storm coming.

KEITH: I like the idea of a planet so rainy that there's two storms at once happening.

AUSTIN: Yeah, the next one is snowy and not just rainy, so get ready. Inside the coffee shop it's like, just a really nice coffee shop! It's not a brand— It's not a Constellation Cafe, It's just a little



local, student-run coffee shop that is closed, except when you go in it's clear there's been activity here pretty recently.

KEITH: I used to do work study here.

AUSTIN: Oh, you definitely did work study here. That excuse would've worked here even though it didn't at that weird— that other place.

[KEITH laughs]

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (hushed scolding) What the hell you doing?

KEITH (as Mako): We're— Rigour—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (annoyed) Let me get— Sit down. I'm going to get you coffee, that wasn't a bit.

KEITH (as Mako): Okay.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Then he goes over and starts to make espresso.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Who sent you out here?

KEITH (as Mako): Uh...

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Are you a backup for the twins?

KEITH (as Mako): We... no. Wait, the what?

ALI (as Aria): What twins?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Minerva? I'm here looking out for... I don't know. They sent me here, they said they knew some shit was going on, and they don't quite like that September hasn't fallen into line. So, I'm just—

KEITH (as Mako): Alright, so—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): We're safe in here, we can talk.

KEITH: No— Well, we're kinda not safe on this whole planet?

AUSTIN: You're safe— Mako, you're off the grid in here.

KEITH: Oh, okay.

AUSTIN: It's weird. Its like— Then again, it's a little disconcerting probably.

KEITH: Right. Okay, I'm gonna,

KEITH (as Mako): So, imagine the worst robot, that you can? And... and imagine one that's way worse—it's like the bad one you're thinking of? It's like it's dad,

ART (as Cass): Ibex sent us here.

KEITH (as Mako): —and it's here.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Ibex sent you here?

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, to—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): [laughs in amused disbelief] Wait, you're working for *Ibex*? Boy, that adds up.

(overlapped)

KEITH (as Mako): No, no. I punched him in the face.

ALI (as Aria): We're doing a lot.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Aria, you part of this vanguard thing? I know you have some, like, radical... feelings, sometimes.

ALI (as Aria): [sighs]... (pleadingly) Don't call them *feelings*...

KEITH (as Mako): It's complicated. Ibex is not— He's like barely even a threat now that this other thing is a thing.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): That guy has an army!

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, well his army is like, a fraction of this other dude's army? This bad robot that I was talking about, and he's<sup>2</sup> on this planet? And that's dangerous.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): ... I gotta look into all of this.

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<sup>2</sup> Rigour is it/its.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah. His name's R— (whispers) His name's Rigour.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): ... That's a bad name.

KEITH (as Mako): It's bad for a divine, yeah.

ART (as Cass): We're going to send two armies at each other, it'll be—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Wait a second— It's a *divine*?

KEITH (as Mako): It's a divine and it's named Rigour and it's the dad divine.

ART (as Cass): ... Did you call it the *dad* divine?

AUSTIN: Yeah, the divine of dads.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, it's like the daddy?

AUSTIN: It's not— Don't say Rigour is daddy.

KEITH: (through laughter) Divine daddy!

AUSTIN: Rigour is not daddy!

KEITH: Rigour is my divine daddy!

(overlapped)

ALI: Stop.

AUSTIN: Stop.

[AUSTIN laughs]

JACK: Ivy! Ivy! No, Ivy take it off—[audio cuts]

[ART, AUSTIN and ALI bursts into laughter]

AUSTIN: A very specific shout-out to a fan of the show and it's very—

[ALI, ART and KEITH laugh]

AUSTIN: Ugh, wow...

[ALI still suffering through her laughter]

JACK: [laughs] We can bleep that if needs be.

AUSTIN: No, it's 2016 and Zootopia is real, so—

[ALI wheezes, KEITH laughs]

KEITH: Zootopia is the *realist*.

AUSTIN: Whew. So,

ALI: (unintelligible)—Computer love.

AUSTIN: Yes. Actually, Ivy is launching a new mecha comic.

JACK: Oh yeah! I've seen ripples about this but I'm really excited to actually see—

[ALI is speaking over him, she's too far away from the mic to make out]

JACK: Oh, I'll be excited for it in a year!

AUSTIN: Yeah!

AUSTIN (as Paisley): It's a divine? Jesus Christ! No wonder the twins thought something was up. So, what do you have on Twelfth? That guy seems like no good.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, he's real bad. Uh... Someone was asking Ibex to help with Rigour as like, "Aah! You're the only one that can help!" and Twelfth *literally* instead of sending that through to Ibex, called Rigour.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Okay.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah. So, he's like the *worst* guy. 'Cause like... think of the amount of people—

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Are you *bleeding*?

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, I got shot— I got shot, like, *really* bad. But, I didn't— (proudly) I was brave about it.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): [amused scoff] You were brave, good.

[KEITH and ALI laugh]

AUSTIN: He hands each of you a little espresso.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Cass, what is it you wanted to talk about?

ART (as Cass): Uh, I mostly want us to get out of the open where we got shot a couple hours ago.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): You should be safe in here from them. As far as I can tell, those Tzadik don't— They used to have a relationship with this Twelfth guy, but something happened. I'm not sure yet.

ALI (as Aria): What do you know about them?

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, we have some friends on the planet, and before everything went all staticy they were like, "(robotic voice) Tzadik— [static] Help— [static] —something [static] not what they seem," or whatever. I can't really remember the specifics.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): So they're uh... They seem to be... a military unit independant or connected to somebody else outside, who... They were working with Twelfth for a while, it's clear. And then, uh... I don't know. They seem to have split off doing their own thing. He is not pleased about it.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, well. They can't be *worse* than him. Could they be helpful?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): I don't know. I don't have a contact with them yet. I was hoping to make one soon.

KEITH (as Mako): Um...

ALI (as Aria): Is it just you here, or you working with anyone else?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): You know I work alone. How about you? You said you have other people? The Chime is four people, (there wouldn't) be other people with you.

KEITH (as Mako): They—[sighs]. Well, this one got a girlfriend.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (intrigued) ...Oh?

(overlapped)

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah. So anyway, *hi*...

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (to Aria) Really?

KEITH (as Mako): Um...

(overlapped)

ALI (as Aria): Yeah... or something...

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Why didn't you tell me?

ALI (as Aria): (dismissively) I don't know, we're almost there.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): But who is it?

ALI (as Aria): Don't worry about it.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Do I know her?

(overlapped)

ART (as Cass): Yeah, you might.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, it's this—

[ALI (as Aria) makes a small sound in protest]

KEITH (as Mako): —It's this like, really— It's this real big girl that tried to kill us all?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Jacqui Greene! You're dating Jacqui Greene!

ART (as Cass): Oh, that's the one!

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (teasingly) Oh, she's *trouble*, Aria.

KEITH (as Mako): (impressed) You got that from that! You're good.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Uh huh, she's a big girl.

[ALI laughs]

ALI (as Aria): She's— she's great...

AUSTIN (as Paisley): So are you exclusive, or like, what's the...?

ALI (as Aria): [laughs] Paisley,

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Aw, I'm kidding.

ALI (as Aria): Let's not do this here.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): That's fair.

[ALI lightly laughs]

[pause]

KEITH: I drink all of the espresso at once.

[AUSTIN laughs, ALI wheezes]

AUSTIN: [amused huff] He ruffles your hair, and says:

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (softly) Slow down, Mako. No rush.

[ALI and JACK laugh]

AUSTIN (as Paisley): We're safe here. I have supplies in the basement, Cass can probably get you fixed up. We'll wait 'till the storm to pass, should be only a couple of days—

ART (as Cass): I don't think we have days.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): And then, you can finish...

(overlapped):

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, we have like—

ALI (as Aria): Yeah, we don't have that much time.

KEITH (as Mako): We have like *twenty* minutes.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Wait, what's the rush?

KEITH (as Mako): Rig— Okay, so imagine um... A star system, and then imagine a robot that can kill all of it, at once.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Here's what I don't get. If this thing is so dangerous, how come it hasn't killed anybody yet?

KEITH (as Mako): You mean recently?

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Like, if it's here, how come it isn't *here*?

ART (as Cass): I don't think that's how it works.

KEITH (as Mako): Well, it didn't—I don't know. I don't think it came here to kill people, it came here 'cause Twelfth asked it to. So we gotta find Twelfth, is what I mean.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): This thing *talks*? Like, what's the...? I don't...

KEITH (as Mako): I mean, divines talk. I never met it. It's like old, though.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Have any of you met it?

ART (as Cass): No.

ALI (as Aria): Yes.

KEITH: Um, the one that ran away from you? Is the one that's met it.

AUSTIN (as Paisley): Oh.

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah. That one's a divine too. That one's two divines!

[ALI and ART sigh]

(overlapped)

ALI (as Aria): We've had a really long couple of weeks.

ART (as Cass): Yeah—(unintelligible).

KEITH (as Mako): Yeah, AuDy was—

AUSTIN: AuDy, what are you doing? [laughs] Yeah. He raises his brow—

[ALI laughs]

KEITH: [laughs] You're right! That does sound immediately less believable!

AUSTIN (as Paisley): (resigned) I'm gonna need another espresso. I'll be right back.

AUSTIN: Uh, AuDy. What are you doing? We'll wrap up soon, also.

JACK: [deep breath] Okay. Can I safely get out of the gate, is that assumed?

AUSTIN: Oh yeah. Again, you sneak out, they go, "Oh, make sure you go indoors soon, sir!"



JACK: Oh, okay. I'm going to [laughs] pick up the sniper rifle.

AUSTIN: Good call.

JACK: And I'm gonna head south towards the path.

AUSTIN: Okay, um... [pause]. There's something with you, you realize. The mesh is like, *clawing* on you. It does not want to let you go, or maybe it was here before, and you weren't tuned into it until you've gone into the student center. But like, you see that the buildings, the old Apostolosian buildings, are a little more faded than they were earlier. Maybe the rain has washed something away, but... Y'know I mentioned before that some of these buildings were literally new stuff bolted on top of old Apostolosian stuff, and I kinda described that as being a smooth transition, but it's not smooth now that you look at it. It looks like... ramshackled and put together sloppily. Everything has din of age on it that it didn't have before, and you can't quite— It feels like that's a skin, like the way it was in the student center, but you can't wipe it away. By the time you get back to the library you realize it isn't a skin, it isn't a façade over this stuff, it's that the façade has been pulled away from that stuff. Whenever you focus in, you can see it's like, "Oh no, these buildings are actually in near disrepair," and everyone's just living in this Mesh dream.

JACK: Hm. Are they— The rain's not getting into the buildings or anything, they're closed, but they're just shabby and—

AUSTIN: No, no. It's just— Yeah. It's just gone from a really picturesque town to one that— I mean, yeah! There's probably some buildings where the rain is getting in. Not all of them, this isn't— It's not dilapidated, right? But, it isn't—

(overlapped)

AUSTIN: It isn't pristine, the way it looks.

JACK: It's— a very, very, very effective Instagram filter.

AUSTIN: Incredibly, yeah. [pause] You cut through some alleyways and find your way back past the library, and I guess onto the path?

JACK: Yup. I think as I'm going, I'm trying to look for signs of Orth and Natalya, which is hard to do 'cause I'm just in a city in a rainstorm? But I can—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: I have something in my favor, here. Which is that earlier we were in a gunfight, so I'm looking for signs of a struggle, or I'm looking for bullets, or I'm looking for marks on walls or

whatever. And this isn't something that I'm very— like, Liberty and Discovery [sighs], it's not a detective robot, it just finds stuff.

[AUSTIN huffs amusedly]

JACK: And it finds stuff serendipitously rather than deliberately, I think? But I think it's trying.

AUSTIN: You... I guess give me... It sounds like you're "Assessing" to me.

JACK: Yeah, okay!

AUSTIN: So, give me an "Assess".

JACK: [hums] Please work. [pause] Okay, that's a nine!

AUSTIN: That's a nine.

JACK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That'll do.

AUSTIN: A nine is solid. So, ask your question. It sounds like you're looking for...

JACK: Yeah, I'm looking for... What's the best question for that?

AUSTIN: Um... It sounds like, "What do I notice despite an effort to conceal it?"

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: 'Cause it sounds like what you're looking for is evidence of a fight.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So I think you actually find it a bit away from the library. You find it— I'm gonna say you don't the exact same route as you took before, right?

JACK: Mhmm.

AUSTIN: That would be probably— You don't just walk backwards towards the library exactly. I think you find... You find a shell, you kick— again, you're not a detective, you're just kind of aware, and you find yourself kicking a shell casing, down one of these little side alleys that runs between these large quadruple town houses. And, you see down another side alley and into a basement there is ... There was a scuffle. There's a shelving unit that's been knocked over, and you sensors pick up the distinct smell of blaster fire, or gun— I don't know if we're using blasters or if we're using pistols. We never really talked about projectile weapons in this game.

[JACK lightly laughs]

AUSTIN: But whatever that chemical discharge is, it's there.

JACK: I'm going to go down and cautiously—I think probably deploying the shotgun—I'm going to go down and, um... fight.

AUSTIN: Mhm. There's a body at the end of the walkway [JACK: Uh oh.] or, the end of the hallway. It's the man on the card that you found. M. Declan.

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: Stupid grin on his face.

JACK: Still?

AUSTIN: Eh, he died with it. Neck is broken, and you can see that there is, on his back, one of those charges that Jacqui places.

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: Not detonated.

JACK: Hmm...

AUSTIN: It's beeping.

JACK: (slightly panicked) Um, Is it safe for me to be here?

AUSTIN: Probably not.

JACK: Okay. And that's all that's in this room, it's just the body of Declan.

AUSTIN: Yeah, it ends in a basement storage facility, a storage room. And he's just there, and you don't see any other people here.

JACK: Um... I'm going to... Before I leave, I'm going to call out, as gently as I can, I'm going to call out.

AUSTIN: Mhm. No one responds.

JACK: Okay. Then I'm going to leave, and heads towards the road.

AUSTIN: Your voice hangs in the air after you leave it. Like, as you step away, you can hear... “hello?” as if it was a physical object stuck there. You make your way back to that path?

JACK: Mhmm.

AUSTIN: And you’re walking. You’re just a robot walking in the woods, [MUSIC - “The Long Way Around” begins] and eventually you break from the mesh completely, and it stops clawing back at you. And... I think she finds you. With a click of a gun.

AUSTIN (as woman): (sternly) Stop where you are.

JACK: [takes a tense breath] I guess I do.

AUSTIN (as woman): Who sent you?

JACK (as AuDy): Ibex.

AUSTIN (as woman): [light amused scoff] (softer) Come with me. I think we gotta talk.

AUSTIN: And Maryland September leads you deeper into the woods.

[MUSIC - “The Long Way Around” continues]

[[1:23:22]]

AUSTIN: Uh, let’s uh... I’m Austin Walker, you can find me @austin\_walker on Twitter, and giantbomb.com. What about you, Jack?

JACK: I’m Jack de Quidt, you can find me on Twitter @notquitereal, [MUSIC - “The Long Way Around” fades out] or play the game I wrote on Steam, which is um— Just search [laughs] “Terribly Cursed Emerald” on Steam and you’ll get it.

AUSTIN: [laughs] There you go.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Ali, what about you?

ALI: You can find me @ali\_west on Twitter.

AUSTIN: Keith?

KEITH: You can find me @keithjcarberry on Twitter, and if you haven't checked out youtube.com/runbutton yet, you should do that because it's good, it's really good!

JACK: It is really good.

AUSTIN: It's really good. I'm a big fan.

ALI: Me and Keith are doing a stream of Arctic Alive right now, which is like, actually really good. The game is okay.

KEITH: It's like phenomenally — It is phenomenally bad game that is phenomenally interesting to play. The first two episodes are on the YouTube channel, the third one is going up on our GameWisp, contentburger.biz, tonight. It'll be on YouTube tomorrow.

AUSTIN: Great.

KEITH: But this isn't happening in real time, so it'll be already on Youtube by the time this is up!

AUSTIN: Yeah. And, Art.

ART: Hey! You can find me on Twitter @atebbel, you can read stuff I write on comicmix.com and I'm sort of doing twitch.tv/streamfriends again! With—

AUSTIN: Yeah, it's been nice.

ART: With a little bit of Hearthstone slash wrestler "Hot or Not" with Ali and Keith this week.

KEITH: Hi!

AUSTIN: Wait, who's hot and who's not?

[pause]

ALI: Watch the stream to find out! Goodnight everyone!

(overlapped)

KEITH: Yeah, you'll be surprised to see—

AUSTIN: Wait are we post-Wrestlemania right now?

ART: By the time this comes out?

ALI: Oh...

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: This might be two weeks before Wrestlemania.

AUSTIN: Alright here we go, predictions.

[JACK laughs]

AUSTIN: This is also pre-Roadblock, so...

ART: Well, I don't think anything's gonna happen at Roadblock.

[pause]

AUSTIN: What if it changes? What if Dean wins?

ART: Dean's not going—

ALI: (worried) What if Dean gets out!?

ART: Don't set yourself up for this, guys. Nothing's gonna happen at Roadblock.

AUSTIN: What if Dean gets the belt?

KEITH: Can I tell you this? Dean was one of the first "Hot or Nots"

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Dean is— How did it come down?

KEITH: You gotta watch to find out!

AUSTIN: Fuck! Got it!

JACK: Keith, I'm going to say a wrestler and you have to say if he's hot or not. Okay, ready?

KEITH: I also will— I'll have to Google this wrestler.

AUSTIN: No, no. no. You cannot.

JACK: Okay, ready?—

KEITH: Oh okay, this is going by name alone?

AUSTIN: Yes, uh huh.

KEITH: Okay, done.

JACK: Wario.

[AUSTIN laughs]

KEITH: Hot.

[ART and ALI laugh]

AUSTIN: Alright! Goodnight everybody!

KEITH: (through laughter) Goodnight!

[KEITH and JACK laugh]

[[end]]