

COUNTER/WEIGHT 2x35: A Knock at the Door

(transcribed by Sharlene)

Opening Narration: An excerpt from “These Mundane Gods: A Treatise on the Diasporan Divines in the Golden Era” by Dr. Jace Rethal:

Throughout the length of the Orion arm, even the most ambitious academics and hobbyist historians have long accepted that there is no way to know the truth about the so-called Divines that tower over the history of the Automated Diaspora. What were they fundamentally? Tools of labor or war put to the supposed public good? Machine gods worshiped at the most naive of altars? The first true alien life? Or something even less knowable than that?

The answer, I propose, can be found in the work done by Dr. Maryland September and Attar Rose, also known as the Candidate Ibex. This remains a complicated matter. On the one hand, their invention laid the foundation for the abuses and tragedies of the late era September Institute. We cannot shrink from this point. But with notes and other materials made recently available, we can now also say their work has provided the most valuable insight to date on what may be the single most important invention since antiquity. No point is more important than the one laid out by Dr. September herself in a private memo sketched soon after Attar Rose left the institute for the final time.

“The Divines,” she wrote, “have always been little more than the shadows of the Automated Diaspora itself. Their metallic bodies the physical infrastructure of the state. Their bright eyes the policy plans that shape the daily lives of Diasporic citizens. Their weapons a reflection of the nation's xenophobic elitism. And their pilots, dressed up in rhetoric, symbolic sacrifices so the average Diasporan dare not take the blame themselves.”

Over just a few months, September and Rose sought to invert this on its head. If there had to be mechanistic deities of democracy, they figured, then the gods themselves should have a voice.

AUSTIN: Um, so what's the question you specifically wanted to ask about? Did you just want to ask about how Ibex spoke about Maryland?

JACK: Yeah, I feel that...yeah. So...we know that, we know that they AuDy unit doesn't have this capability.

AUSTIN: Mhm.

JACK: But in the anime of this, it would've been, would've been like a hologram of Ibex was in the room talking to Liberty and Discovery about--

AUSTIN: Right now, live. I see.

JACK: Yeah. As though, as though, Liberty and Discovery are saying: "Look. Look, this is why you have to come with us."

AUSTIN: I see. I mean, you could do a super creepy bit of AuDy just voicing things Ibex says.

JACK: I was thinking about that...

AUSTIN: Is that too far?

JACK: I think, if we did that, we'd have to acknowledge that that's really terrifying?

AUSTIN: Sure.

JACK: Like, if we do that, it has to do it as though AuDy says: "Look at this" and then just starts speaking in the voice of Ibex.

AUSTIN: I'd like to--it's, I'm fine with that.

JACK: Yeah, that's really terrifying.

AUSTIN: Do you want...when, what part of Ibex's history do you want this information from? Here's, I mean, here's the timeline as we know it about Ibex. There was a time which from before he was a candidate where he was in a relationship with Maryland September. He was in a relationship with the woman named Maryland. Her name was not Maryland September. She took the name September when she moved here. [crosstalk] Um, they didn't name the planet after herself--

JACK [crosstalk]: Oh, she didn't--oh, okay.

AUSTIN: She invented a new identity for herself and claimed the planet as hers. We know that...god, I have his name written down somewhere. I've said it recently.

Um...I said it in an intro, but I've forgotten it for this. The war breaks out. He gets called to be a candidate. The reason they leave the Diaspra is because they don't want to fuck around with Candidates and Divines anymore, because they both kind of hate them. But he feels a pull. I think maybe you get this in a series of, of...there's, you kind of scrub through conversations with Ibex, right? And like, you're looking for the best bits. Um, and then there's that period of what he knows about Maryland. So, he's talked to you about that period, but you weren't there with him during that period. Then, there was, like, when he first became a Candidate, and I imagine that that's a period he talked about her a lot. Because he was still, like, getting into his skin as a candidate, and, like, hadn't yet cut those ties, like, emotionally. And he talked about her a lot, he talked about his younger brother Quentin a lot. Again, he was not Jerboa yet. Where he was like, doing the job of being a candidate. And then, Maryland reaches out to him and says...I think maybe this is a conversation you get, which is, Ibex comes to Liberty and Discovery for advice, saying that Maryland reached out for help. That, the, the contacts that she has that are backing the September Institute aren't seeing the results they want to see. That the kind of organic way that she's doing this isn't working. She wants someone to come...she wants Ibex to come and -- regardless of their relationship status, regardless of their history -- to just, like, figure out what the fuck they're doing with this institute, and if they can fix it, if can they make it something that's salvageable but still positive. And he goes and has that trip, which is part of the trip where Liberty and Discovery convinces him....or, I guess, after that trip, that Liberty and Discovery convinces him -- which is in another intro -- that he should be, that there should be someone there in September Institute that's his proxy, that's not just September or Twelfth. Then, he also talks to you -- there's a second conversation, the post conversation there -- of like, man, that was a really good trip. Man, I missed her a whole bunch, like -- don't get me wrong -- I'm still committed to Righteousness, but it was nice to be...myself again. Um, I haven't felt like myself since I've been with her. Really. Uh, that sort of stuff. Um--

JACK: So I think I give her those conversations. And I think it's not like AuDy's acting these out--

AUSTIN: Mhm.

JACK: He's¹ just standing there. Imitating this sound.

AUSTIN: Okay. He's not doing motions.

JACK: No, no, no...

AUSTIN: He's just like, standing there, like a speaker.

JACK: Yes, totally.

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: And then, at the end, uh...the conversation stops. But you can hear from the hiss through AuDy's speakers that audio is still playing.

AUSTIN: Mhm.

JACK: And in the background, almost too far away from the microphone, you can hear the clinking of glasses, and then you hear someone chopping vegetables. At the kitchen. And, uh, it's Ibex's voice, and then in the background, you can hear Jerboa, and it's clear that this is from a while ago. Oh, and--oh, Quentin?

AUSTIN: Quentin, yeah.

JACK: And you can hear Quentin say, "oh, is it ready yet?" and then there's a long pause, and Ibex says, "it's--it's just not going to be as good". And then the audio cuts out. And AuDy turns around and walks away.

AUSTIN: Good.

¹ AuDy uses they/them pronouns.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: You're not telling me anything I already didn't know. Now take a seat, let these two eat, wait out the storm, and then, when it's clear, you can leave.

AUSTIN: And then she goes back to chopping vegetables.

[ALI and JACK soft chuckle]

AUSTIN: You can, you know, you can try to make a Fast Talk roll or something else, but that information is a dead end for convincing her. That's a part of that failure.

JACK: No, it's okay, I'm prepared to cut back.

AUSTIN: Alright. Cass and Aria? What's up with you?

ART: Um, what did--what did that look like to us? When Mako left.

JACK: Oh, good question.

AUSTIN: He, like, closed the door, and like, when he walked past the window, he was in his school uniform. Like, instantly. But again the thing that's weird about it was that it felt natural. It--it felt natural for enough of a moment that after he stepped away from you, you finally felt, like, "no, that's weird, that's not right". But for as long as you saw him in his uniform, you thought, "Oh, yeah, Mako. Mako Trig, of, you know, from House Rosemoon".

ART: Right. Just information I didn't know about him.

AUSTIN: Uh, but you totally--it's weird. You....welling up in the three of you, still on campus, is this other information, is this other bank of information. Sort of like what AuDy has. Now, you can consult -- you can't do it inside the cafe, but Mako can do this now. Uh, you can consult the information of this life that you're in now. Uh, using Research as if it were a different source.

ART: So I have reason to believe that, if I were to walk out that door, I would become a student here?

AUSTIN: I don't know that you know that you'll be a student here, you could be a--because it's like, he was a student. He was a student at House Rosemoon. Um, you don't know what will happen if you walk out there. But sure, maybe you would be.

ART: I'm pretty old to be a student. [sigh] I want to wait it out.

AUSTIN: Okay.

ART: But I don't want to leave Mako out there. We should've stopped him, we didn't--

KEITH: I'm fine, I've got a test to study for anyway. So, it's--

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: Christ. What are your directives? Let's see. [pause to read] Hm, neither of these really come in.

ART: No....

AUSTIN: Hm...Aria, how are you feeling about this?

ART: Yeah, Aria.

AUSTIN: Do you think Mako's safe?

ALI: Um...[sighing] no, but I didn't want him to leave in the first place.

AUSTIN: Do you, do you think it would be heroic of you to go and save him?

ALI: [laughing] I was just thinking that and I think that it would be.

AUSTIN: Okay.

ALI: I like Mako a lot.

AUSTIN: Okay.

ALI: And him just, like, being in a school uniform is really concerning?

AUSTIN: Totally.

ALI: Um...

ART: Everyone likes Mako.

ALI: Yeah...

ART: But what if he's already dead?

[ALI giggles]

ALI: I told him not to leave!

AUSTIN: You did tell him that.

KEITH: It's fine, I can get out of this on my own! It's not even, it's not even a final, it's a midterm.

AUSTIN: Oh, can I go back to that previous scene really quick?

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Uh... [chuckling] that last bit that you play, uh, AuDy. Of the chopping of vegetables. There's, like....this weird hum. And Ibex turns, uh, in your memory of him, to Quentin and says:

AUSTIN [as Ibex]: Quentin, can you close the refrigerator?

AUSTIN: Alright. Back to the future.

[JACK deep sighs]

ART: Okay!

JACK: I wanna know what happens if I go in the rain. [laughing] I'm not going to.

ART: We're not--

KEITH: I think AuDy might be a mascot?

[scattered laughs]

AUSTIN [crosstalk]: Uh, that'd be pretty good. It'd be pretty good.

KEITH [crosstalk]: A robot janitor?

JACK: Or I'd be parking cars.

AUSTIN: Okay. What are you guys doing?

ART: We should split up. That was the information I got, that it was easier to go through the storm by yourself. I could go out the store alone and I could go toward AuDy.

AUSTIN: Yep.

ART: And you could go out the store and you can go toward Mako. And I don't know how technical this alone thing is, like I don't know if it has to be, like, oh, I'll wait five minutes and go, or if we could leave this door and go in opposite directions--if that's good enough?

AUSTIN: Again, what I really mean by that is that -- at any moment, no matter what the situation is -- you have the I Love It When A Plan Comes Together that can just instantly get you wherever you need. Um, and it, and it means that you don't have to....if....if you're moving together and Aria fails a roll, then that's not good for both of you. Um, whereas if you're moving alone, all you have to count on is you succeeding. You know?

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN: Okay. So who's leaving first? Or are you leaving at the same time?

ALI: Um, let me roll this thing first. Um....

AUSTIN: Oh, yeah, Vision Quest. Or, no, "Vision Thing" -- not "Vision Quest", that's a different...no...

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: Nope! Vision Thing is rolling Style when you have time for a personal -- or is it, uh -- time and space for an emotional connection with someone, you passionate advocate. How are you doing that again? Because you didn't actually -- you said that before your Audacity was back.

ALI: Yeah. So, uh, um--

AUSTIN: How are you--

ALI: [laughing] So I think that the conversation that, um, Cass and Aria are going to have over coffee is talking about the, the weather on September [AUSTIN: Mhm.] and how they both sort of miss having to deal with weather, even if it's an inconvenience? And how it's great how people on Counter/weight sort of have this, like, rhythm in their lives.

ART: If anyone wants to write the fanfiction for this conversation, I imagine it's very wet on Apostolos.

[ALI & AUSTIN laugh]

AUSTIN: That's true.

ALI: Like really.

[ALI pauses to read dice roll]

ALI: Oh my god.

AUSTIN: Ali rolled a five.

ALI: Cass is not convinced.

KEITH: So we have rolled two fives and a three in a row!

AUSTIN: A-huh. Um--

ART: That's okay, we're saving our good rolls for not getting lost in the storm. What happens when she walks out, do I get worse at this?

AUSTIN: Um, no. There's, there's --uh, no, I get to make a move.

ALI: Oh, yeah, everytime there's a hard fail, there's a fucking hell.

AUSTIN: I get to make a move as hard or soft as I want. Uh, there's a knock at the back door. Paisley shoots you a look.

AUSTIN [as Paisley]: I thought you said there wasn't going to be a problem.

ALI: Uh, Austin, how can I avoid trouble or hide here? I still have a hold.

AUSTIN: You could leave, you could walk out the front door.

[ALI giggles]

ART: Uh, is this clock "Horrible Reality Storm"?

AUSTIN: No. It's not.

[ALI groans]

ART: I thought when we left Counterweight, everyone basically liked us? When did this happen?

AUSTIN: A lot of these clocks are September clocks. Um, in fact, [counting] one, two, three, four, five, six of the eight things here are specifically about things on September.

ART: Fine.

AUSTIN: It's a big mission. So, there's a hard knock. Paisley, like, ducks under the bar for a second and pops back up with a, a, a longarm. Uh, that has a silencer on the end. And he, like, steps -- he moves past you both, and, in a way, that he would have pushed you if he wasn't so ready trying to kill whoever is trying to come in this place. What do you do?

ART: Take out my rifle.

ALI: Yeah, duck behind that bar?

AUSTIN: Um, alright, so-- I'm going to sketch this real quick. I haven't done this in a hot minute.

JACK: Oh, dear.

AUSTIN: This is really good. This is actually really cool, um, because the door has to open. Um, and, so it's, kind of uh, a longer than it is wide room, right in the middle...um, a bunch of tables in chairs, that little fake door that comes down. There are, there's a door on the front, and there's another door back here. And then there are a bunch of tables of chairs and a bar. Right? Okay. Um, so, Paisley...let's go to Objects, and make a quick P for Paisley [tsk noises].

JACK: You're not going to give her, like, four ducks?

AUSTIN: You're right. This is why--what am I doing? I've forgotten my roots.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: And what a fool I am. There we go. There's Paisley Moon. He is a moon, and he's standing right here, like, left of the door. Uh, where are you two?

ART: Right, that's the front door, or the back door?

AUSTIN: It's the back door. The front door is towards the bar.

ART: I sort of imagined we were kind of here. This is the table where we were having our weather conversation at.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Sure. Aria, you're now back here?

ALI: Yes?

JACK: Uh, for people who don't have the map, it's a long room. Paisley is at the top. The bar is on the left.

AUSTIN: Thank you. The bar is on the left. There's Aria--

JACK: --who is just some music notes.

AUSTIN: And there's Cass--

[laughter]

JACK: --who is a trout.

[loud laughter]

ART: With the way the fanart is going, I thought we're like, a couple of weeks from just a fish in a pair of pants.

AUSTIN: I skip the pants all together! Just a fish!

[more laughing]

ALI: That's the way the fanart should go.

AUSTIN: Uh, so what are you doing?

ART: I think I turn this table sideways, as cover.

AUSTIN: Like for cover?

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Paisley reaches for the door with his left hand while holding the shotgun with his right hand. He opens it a little bit, and there are two security guards on the right side. He's holding the shotgun, like, behind the open door.

AUSTIN [as Paisley]: What can I-- what can I help you with?

AUSTIN: And in a second, the door is kicked in, and the two security guards step inside. And, you know, the thing that's weird is that, the moment they step inside, they're school security uniforms, like, flash in and out of existence? Or like, kinda lockstep with the same sort of armour that the women who was the sniper was wearing before. Simultaneously, as the rain and wind pour in, as-- it's not raining outside, but rain and wind are pouring in as if it were raining outside. Cass, uh, and, and Aria, you recognize, you see on each other, that your own clothes are doing the same thing. Aria, you have on House Blueworld, um, kind of sea form and dark blue. A skirt with a blazer. And a tie. And Cass, you have on a House Whitestar. Um, uh, all white, everything, with like, little bits of gold, um, on the collar. Hiding behind this table. Um...what do you do as these people, like, burst into the door? Paisley's shotgun goes off, hitting the wall next to him, but he doesn't loose grip on it. He, like, very smoothly slides back behind this table and flips it up for cover. This is all happening in seconds. Uh, Paisley's outfit doesn't change at all.

[ALI chuckles]

AUSTIN: So, what are you doing?

ART: Uh...open, open fire...?

AUSTIN: So do your roll! You are, uh -- it sounds like what you're doing is, uh--

ART: Mixing--

AUSTIN: --Seizing. Or, it's not Seized, where the fuck is...oh, no, you're Mixing It Up. That's what it is.

ART: Yeah. And, I--

AUSTIN: If your goal is to use armed violence against a force to seize control and objective, versus you're not just threatening violence, here? You're just shooting at them to scare them off?

ART: No, I don't think that's going to work.

AUSTIN: Okay. Well, give me a Meat roll. Mix it Up.

ART: Alright. Because my cyberware is still broken. Everything's terrible.

AUSTIN: Correct. Yep. Don't hesitate. [pause to read dice roll] Nice!

ART: But that's not!

KEITH [crosstalk]: Nice! First good roll in, like, an hour.

JACK [crosstalk]: Here we go! We're off to the races.

AUSTIN: You, so you achieve your objective, you got a ten, so you don't have to make any of these negative things. Um, one of the two Tzadik agents, uh, gets up and gets lit up with -- we still haven't decided what your assault rifle, uh, shoots? Is it just bullets?

ART: I think it's just bullets.

AUSTIN: Okay. Gets lit up with these bullets. You see the first two get absorbed by, like, the biokinetic armour the Tzadik agent is wearing. And then the third one hits close enough to where the first two wear to, like, pierce it, and then they drop to their knees, cough, and then fall over. Not dead, but not in a good way. Aria, what are you doing?

ALI: I think I'm going to pop up and try to shoot one of them with my pistol.

AUSTIN: Again, you're trying to do definite harm? You're not just shooting at them.

ALI: Yes.

AUSTIN: Okay. Give me a Mix it Up. [pause to read] That's a hard miss. That's a four.

ALI: Oh, my fucking rolls. Ugh--

AUSTIN: That's a big ol' miss. Uh--

KEITH: This is the round where we advance every clock at once!

AUSTIN: Ah, that's not what happens here. You, you take a shot -- what do you have, a pistol, right?

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: You're firing shots at this agent who moves incredibly quickly. This dude is a pretty burly, built guy, but has just this incredible speed, who just, like, ducks, under where he knew you would shoot at? He's not dodging bullets necessarily, he's dodging the set of patterns he knows that shoots take. Like, "oh, she's shooting for center mass, let me get a roll", and then rolls underneath where you're shooting, gets behind Paisley, and, with Paisley, in just like a quick couple of, uh, inches, slaps Paisley's gun away and, uh, just puts a gun at Paisley's head.

ALI: Eeeeeee!

AUSTIN [as Agent]: Everybody stop.

ART [as Cass]: O...kay.

AUSTIN [as Agent]: Put your weapons down. Or your friend dies.

ALI: Aria immediately stands up and puts her gun on the counter.

ART: Cass doesn't give up cover but slides his² gun out of reach.

AUSTIN: He pulls the trigger.

ALI: What?!

AUSTIN: And turns and faces you. Paisley drops. What do you do?

[ALI cries out, almost laughing]

ART: I did what he said!

ALI: Ugh, this is the worst thing.

AUSTIN: So, gun is now aimed at ...Cass. Who he's recognizing as the one who killed his friend quickly and is therefore a more valuable target. What do you do?

ART: Well, I'm behind this table, so, I guess--

AUSTIN: Yeah, totally.

² Cass uses they/them pronouns.

ART: I think I have about forty five seconds longer to live than I did if I stood up.

AUSTIN: Totally.

ART: How long is the...how long is the fuse on that flashbang?

AUSTIN: Uh, a couple, a couple of seconds. Or like, uh -- like, no, I mean, no it's a weird future flashbang, how long do you set it for? It has, like, an old-style iPod, like, wheel -- click wheel, that you can set the fuse on it.

ART: Alright, I set it for, like, two seconds, and I just, like, chuck it at his feet.

AUSTIN: Okay. Um--

ART: And then I duck. And I hope, I hope Aria gets the message. Who knows, really.

AUSTIN: Aria--

ALI: Oh, Aria -- Aria has already crumpled. So, like--

AUSTIN: Give me an Act Under Fire move, Cool, Aria.

[pause to read]

ART: Aye!

AUSTIN: Oh, boom. Yeah.

ALI: Succeeded that one. Cool.

AUSTIN: Nice. Good. You're not blinded by this.

ALI: I already had my head in my hands! Of course I'm not.

AUSTIN: That's good.

ART: What was that second roll?

AUSTIN: You rolled--you rolled Cool again by mistake and failed it. [ALI: Yeah!] So good you got that one out, it doesn't count as anything. [laughter] This guy, this guy is stunned from the flashbang. What do you do?

ART: I grab my gun and try to shoot him.

AUSTIN: I--yeah, you kill him. He crumples onto the floor.

ART: Alright. Ah, shit. We got Paisley killed.

JACK: Oh, do that mean that we failed the, the...

AUSTIN: Nah, Paisley wasn't a member of the Chime.

JACK: Okay.

ART: Ah, okay, we can't stay here anymore.

ALI: Yeah, Aria...[laughing] Aria is, like, crawling towards his body.

AUSTIN: Ah...[sighing] it was a clean shot. Oh, he--he doesn't look bad. But he's dead. You know, maybe if you got him to a hospital *very* quickly. You know, science is a crazy thing in this world. It's a wonderful thing in this world. Um, but there's not, this is--he's on his...his brain was damaged severely. But you know. This is a world--

ART: This is beyond traumaderms?

AUSTIN: Way beyond traumaderms. Do you...you have Gear? And I'll give you a point of Gear that he has, in the basement.

ART: Uh, okay. Does that put Gear in the basement of, of -- have really--

JACK [crosstalk]: Cass--

AUSTIN [crosstalk]: But that's spending a point of--

ART [crosstalk]: --a really good medical setup.

AUSTIN: Yeah, sure. Totally. You know, I think he has whatever the highest quality, um, portable medical care is.

ART: Alright! I mean, I could, uh--if you say it's good enough, I can roll Cool to see if I can try to fix him.

AUSTIN: You will--so, so I'm going to set, like, the terms right now, which is that the best you can do currently is, like, vegetative state. Right? Is, like, coma, but alive.

ART: Sure. That's--that's better than dead.

AUSTIN [crosstalk]: Yeah. I guess. I guess it is? Right.

ART [crosstalk]: But, like, he's going to have to stay here for a bit. We can't get him to a hospital, it's not an option. [end crosstalk] I mean, best case scenario is that I can use his communication equipment to try to talk to a hospital. But, like, we're not moving him. Not going to happen. Sorry, Moon family.

[JACK chuckles]

AUSTIN: Most of his family was in this room probably. So. Uh, give me a roll.

ART: Uh...

AUSTIN: This is--what is this? This is--

ART: This is Apply First Aid?

AUSTIN: Mhm.

ART: Which is cool. I have a, the... I have the expert medical...thing. So it's not like, I'm like... (reading) I am an expert in medicine and pharmaceuticals, if the Heart clock is more than 2,100, remove their Heart by one segment. (end reading)

AUSTIN: Right. So now it's down to one under that. It's down to 2,300. Um. Which is still not great. And I think that you leave him here, this just means ...bad things. But he's alive, for the moment.

ART: Wait. Can we be on the map for a second? We're here?

AUSTIN: Yeah, you're on the map, aren't you?

ART: Right, are we here?

AUSTIN: Yes, you're here.

ART: I--oh. The Cafe. So the hospital is close.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: But the storm is going on.

AUSTIN: There's a university hospital here.

KEITH: But is there anyone inside it?

AUSTIN [crosstalk]: Uh, yeah.

ART [crosstalk]: What hospital closes due to weather? That's--that's the stupidest hospital.

KEITH: Well, a campus hospital might. Like, "sorry, go to the regular hospital".

ART: Well, there is no other hospital on this map.

AUSTIN: Uh, it's probably over in the rises somewhere. It's probably, like, this is another hospital over here.

ALI: But there's--there's, like, a weird--

AUSTIN: Yeah, there's a weird storm that everyone in town knows not to go out in.

ART: Uh, we don't have anything to transport him on. [crosstalk] Because Mako left with the hoverboard--

AUSTIN [crosstalk]: You could, you could--you could spend your point of Gear for something. But yeah, that would be a problem.

ART: Because we can't...carry him.

AUSTIN: You, you could. It would be an Act Under Fire, an Act Under Pressure. For you to be intercepted effectively.

ART: Right.

ALI: I mean, I would be willing to be the one to go transfer him if you want to go do other stuff.

ART: Uh, yeah. I appreciate that. I don't think that helps.

[ALI giggles]

ART: Uh, I mean, I could give you a pep talk. Uh, which would give you--[JACK laughs] which would give you Aid, it would help as if I--as if I had rolled a ten. So I could be, like:

ART [as Cass]: Don't be distracted by that weather. You're better than this stupid planet. You get your friend and you get him to...the hospital. It's right there. We can see it from here. You are Aria Joie.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: Mhm!

ALI: And also, he's not dead? If you go there, he won't be dead.

ART [as Cass]: If you don't succumb to this storm, he lives. If you do, he almost certainly dies.

ALI [as Aria]: That is the most encouraging.

ART [as Cass]: But that's what you do, Aria. You save people.

AUSTIN: Awh.

ART [as Cass]: Don't think about any previous examples of you trying to save people, that's not important right now.

AUSTIN: Alright! Take a plus one on that.

ALI: Okay.

AUSTIN: Aria. Give me a...give me a...Act Under Fire, Cool.

ART [as Cass]: And when you get there, then go find Mako. Bye.

[laughing]

AUSTIN: Good pep talk.

[pause to read]

ALI: Yes! What?

JACK: Yes!

AUSTIN: You didn't even need it! You didn't even need the plus one.

ALI: I did, really.

AUSTIN: You're just like...[huffs]. [Huffs again]. This is, like, a really weird scenario. I think you, like...You step out--how are you carrying his body?

ALI: Um, I think that--I think that Aria is, like, Mom pulling up a car and holding him...no...holding him over--? Over her shoulder?

AUSTIN: He's, like, dead weight, right?

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: I don't know how strong Aria is. I'm not saying it's impossible. I wanna get a good visual image of whatever way that she's doing it.

ALI: I'm not--it is an awkward carry, but I think that it's over the shoulder.

AUSTIN: You get, like, three steps out there. And there's a girl who runs up to you that you know: Maritime? Maritime Lapel? She comes over, and is, like--

JACK: Sorry...[laughing] once more?

AUSTIN: What's up? Maritime, Maritime Lapel.

ART: You're sure it's not one of Cass's friends? Maritime?

AUSTIN: Oh my god. One hundred percent, sure.

AUSTIN [as Maritime]: Oh my god, Aria? Do you need help--

AUSTIN: She immediately--immediately lifts, helps you carry Paisley.

ALI [as Aria]: Cool. Thanks, Maritime.

AUSTIN [as Maritime]: What happened?!

ALI [as Aria]: Uh...I don't know. Someone just came in, and shot him.

AUSTIN [as Maritime]: Someone has a *gun* on campus? Jesus Christ, does C-Sec know?

ALI [as Aria]: Uh...no?

AUSTIN [as Maritime]: [under breath] Oh my...

AUSTIN: Um, so she's like - to give you a picture now - kind of sinewy, she's in your house, she's in House Blueworld -- um, so she's got a similar seafoam and dark blue uniform that you've got on right now. She's wearing like, uh, uh, a nice pantsuit. She's has kind of, uh, dark hair, with streaks of white in it, up in a messy bun -- kinda, like, world-weary eyes, like, a little too...for her age, which is about eighteen, nineteen, it's as if, if she's already sick of the world. But you know, she's in the artist, uh, house, so, and you know that she, like, sculpts things in the mesh. And she's helping you carry Paisley to the, to the hospital.

AUSTIN [as Maritime]: Once this is done, you better go tell somebody about this.

ALI [as Aria]: I--yeah, *I'll* tell them though.

AUSTIN [as Maritime]: Are you sure? Like I could just go, I could just go right now and let C-Sec know, this is...[sigh] we're going to have to lock down campus for sure.

ALI [as Aria]: No, no, you should stay inside. I'll talk to someone.

AUSTIN: Alright, and she gets you to the hospital, um, and...gives you a big hug.

ALI: Awh. Aria desperately needed that.

AUSTIN: Um. And, she looks over, over her shoulder at you, and then starts going south, towards, towards the C-Sec building. Um, but you're able to get Paisley into the hospital. There is, like, a nurse on duty in the reception area, um, but things are just dead in here. I don't want to go into the minutia of all of this, but, like, there is lots of, lots of, like, "oh my lord, what happened? [huffing] this needs to be...who are you? Sign this paper.." Um...

ART: (whispering) Don't sign it!

AUSTIN: Like get him into the, uh, thing--

JACK: Is it pretty much...is it pretty much the reaction you'd expect if you pulled a body that had been shot [AUSTIN: Yes.] into a university hospital?

AUSTIN: Yes. In the middle of like, in the middle of a blizzard.

JACK: Yeah. "What is happening?"

AUSTIN: Um, yeah.

ART: Shot in the head, and then, like, triaged by someone else.

[ALI laughing]

AUSTIN: Triaged by, like...I should talk about what the triage even looks like here. like, there's, there's a special thing called an EMT kit in this game that's a step above a trauma derm. Like...it's the equivalent of wood filler, but for brain. It's like... [JACK laughs] you have a thing that you can shape to be, like, the right...right part and shape of the hole that's left in his head, that will fill it and will prevent further blood loss, that will simulate the remaining connections there. It won't...it won't stop them from dying altogether, but it'll hold them together long enough -- hopefully -- for someone to, you know, give him a new bio brain with, you know, some of his memories installed. If they have access to that. And if not, hey, he's alive, just not with all of what use to be him.

JACK: Uninsured, it costs millions.

AUSTIN: Oh, yes. Thankfully, he is on a Minerva budget...[laughing] so I would suspect. Hey, he is a professional, and I think he, uh, negotiated well. Yeah, yeah

KEITH: You should try that one time-- negotiating well?

[ALI giggles]

AUSTIN: (laughing) Yes! Cass, what are you doing?

ART: Uh...I like, I like, watch Aria until I can't see her anymore.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: And then I...and then I leave, and start walking to where AuDy is.

AUSTIN: Um...you get like...so you get past this cul-de-sac, past the, uh, building of student affairs, and you get to the campus bookstore, and you hear the gates start to close in the distance.

ART: I pick up my pace.

AUSTIN: Um. Sure. Give me an Act Under Fire.

ART: Uh, that's....

[pause to read]

AUSTIN: Cool.

ART: Who's cool? This guy. This guy's cool.

AUSTIN: Cass is. Nice work! Uh...[laughs] on your way out, you see a friend of yours. And, like, I think she...I think she, like, slips--as you're walking past House Whitestar, there's a girl, like, on the fire escape side of that building. So for people who don't see the map on, on, the, website by the way, it doesn't have all these names on it, but on--towards the entryway of the September Institute, there are like, kind of a row of four rectangles, so the southern side of the entrance, sort of,

driveway. Um, those are the different house dormitories. On the northern side, on the Whitestar one, there's this girl on the second floor. I think she's literally hanging her legs out of the window. Um, uh, and is, like, sitting on the edge of the window. She is, like...she's weird. Her name is Maxine Ming, and you think she's from Kesh -- that weird planet, in the northeast of the sector?

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN: Because she wears her hair, like, really old...like, not old fashioned, she wears it in a way that no one has ever seen hair in this world. It's, like, covered? She's wears, like, tons of--not veils? You know, she's just like a fucking pilgrim. Right? [chuckles] It's super weird! And lots of skirts. Long, long skirts. Um, but she's also, like, cool as fuck, compared to anyone, and she, like, never feels out of place, which is a thing that's weird for people in Whitestar, nowadays, because you come from all over, and so, you feel like, you don't belong anywhere but she always seems to present as if she's the most comfortable motherfucker in any room. And she, like, hops down from the second floor and is like:

AUSTIN [as Maxine]: Cass, where are you going?

ART [as Cass]: I--

AUSTIN: [interrupting] One of her hips is, like, slid off to the side in a really smoke way.

ART [as Cass]: I'm sorry, Maxine, I have to...I have to go to the woods.

AUSTIN [as Maxine]: You want some company? This place is super boring.

ART: I--I know her?

AUSTIN: God, it's right there. You can't--can't quite put your finger on it, like, there was this time that she totally had your back during, uh, a debate that broke out in class--

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN: That, like, no one else wanted, other people--that's the thing, other people from Whitestar are...it's, like, notoriously competitive, and, oh, because you're all from different places, and because you're all seen as outsiders, there's lots of like, "who gets to be the one who assimilates in the groups on campus?". Um, so there's not a lot of pairing off here. Sometimes, there's just straight up language barriers--differences. But she, like, totally had your back in this philosophy debate once. You've kind've been, like, friends since then? But you can't really remember the last time you actually hung out with her? Because you know this is fake! You know this didn't happen to you. This isn't what you did! You know that. But it's also like, this is Maxine, she's right here. She's your friend.

ART: Yeah. On the, on the--on that higher level, do I trust her?

AUSTIN: ...Yeah! Totally.

ART: Okay. Uh--

AUSTIN: You didn't fail this roll. Alright, so--

ART [as Cass]: Uh...it's really dangerous, but, uh, if you want to come, then yeah, I could always use help.

AUSTIN: Awesome. And, uh, she, like, does, like, a little skip in front of you, and turns around and shrugs, and is, like:

AUSTIN [as Maxine]: What are you taken so much time for? Let's go!

ART [as Cass]: Alright.

AUSTIN: And starts sprinting towards the...towards the main gate, but then she cuts left, when she passes House Blueworld. And starts heading south. She's like:

AUSTIN [as Maxine]: I know another way, don't worry about it.

AUSTIN: And finds, like, a service exit a little bit further south, probably down near the gym. Um, and cuts out through that and into the suburbs.

ART: Great!

AUSTIN: And, like, is still there. Like, is in the suburbs with you.

ART: Right, well, she's a least that real.

AUSTIN: Like I said. The Mesh on September is weird.

ART: Sure. Ah, okay, yeah, I'll take her as long as she exists.

[AUSTIN snorts]

ART: I dunno. Why not?

AUSTIN: Alright! Sounds good.

ART: I'll need someone to talk to.

[laughing]

ALI: Such a weird day.

AUSTIN: Yeah, it is a weird day. What do you talk to her about? This person, that is your friend, but also is a stranger?

ART: Ah...I don't know.

AUSTIN: Like, are you...are you talking in code about the things that have happened today? In the sense of, like, "ugh, it's been one of those days"? You know, like, "one of my friends got hurt really bad, and--" without getting into specifics? Or something else?

ART: Yeah, and I also think there's a little bit of, like, trying to, like, probe for information? [AUSTIN: Mhm.] Because she knows more than I do.

AUSTIN: Totally.

ART: But, like--

AUSTIN: What sort of information do you want? Specifically.

ART: Uh...Um, what do I think she knows?

AUSTIN: This is a good line of thought, I will say.

ART: I...yeah, what has she heard about September? Does she ever hear any other voices in the Mesh?

AUSTIN: Yeah...so I think she's, like, a year ahead of you. Um, and a thing that she tells you, is that, when she first showed up...She's not just a year ahead of you, sorry, she's a year ahead of you but she's also, like, came to the school before you. She was here with one of the earliest classes. Uh, the September Institute is not just like a high school or college, it's not just a university. It's, like, from junior high forward, and she came here when she was, like, twelve or thirteen. Um, and back then, like, she had a class with Maryland September, and she's, like, "oh, I miss

those days" like, "I missed it when no government types came around, I missed it when we were just allowed to take the classes we thought were really important to us as Strati". Um, she misses the, the, the before the mall was built, before the Bacchus Recreational district was built. Like, she's, like, a very...she's sick of the whole thing. You know? She's a little bit, like, very disenfranchised with this place because she remembers -- and, you know, probably has a very idealized version in her head of what it used to be. Um. I'm going to switch back to Mako right here because I've got a question for him.

KEITH: Hey, what's up?

AUSTIN: Which is: How old were you when you first came to September?

KEITH: Oooo...to September, or when I first came to the school?

AUSTIN: Ei-either. Or are those separate things?

KEITH: Uh, I don't--I don't think they're separate, and I think...four.

AUSTIN: Okay. So you moved to September, to, like, be inducted into the school, when you were four?

KEITH: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Okay. Uh, that means you were probably raised by foster parents [KEITH: Yeah.] until you were old enough to be in classes, and stuff, and were just doing-- effectively, experiments? And, like, very, just like, preschool-type stuff and early education, a little, like, you know how -- this is not the case anymore -- when I was growing up, it was, like, "oh, we have three computers in this school"? And, like, these six kids get to use them once a week. That was, like, the same thing with you and early Stratus technology. Like, you were growing up here, and getting the very basic access to the Mesh before it was even the thing that it now is in September.

How's your--are you just studying? Is that the rest of the night here for you, basically?

KEITH: Um...okay, listen, if I know Mako--

AUSTIN: Uh huh.

KEITH: And I do, because Mako is very similar to me...um, he got distracted really early on in his studying.

AUSTIN: What did he get distracted by?

KEITH: Um...I think, just, like, I think it's whatever the, the September equivalent is to, um, um, a Wikipedia rabbit hole?

AUSTIN: Uh huh. Okay.

KEITH: Like, "ah, just, I'll click this link and read half of this, or I'll just click this link and look at this thing for ten minutes". But I guess it's all in the Mesh, so I can just, like, it's like I'm exploring a tiny mall? That I made appear in my dorm room?

AUSTIN: So here, here's--I like that a lot. Here's the other thing that's weird. One, like...Mako the body is in Mako's...you're in *your* dorm room. But also you're like, literally in your dorm room. Physically.

KEITH: Right.

AUSTIN: And I think that gnaws at you, a little bit. You...you break out of this, kind of, like, this complete--you think, "no, no, no, I have a test" but also, "you have to meet up with AuDy in the woods". You're at this weird middle zone of remembering things, and it's around that time that, um, the gate outside closes, and, like begins to close, and you can hear that the campus is going on lockdown. Um, and there's, like, the sound of thunder, even though it's a bright day outside today. And you

peak outside your dorm room window, and you see Maritime Lapel talking to some security guards, and that's what sends you on this weird, internet Wikipedia rabbit hole. It's that you get this thought of, like, "Yeah, what--whatever happened to her?" like your old friend from school. You and her weren't super tight, she was Aria's friend, not yours--and that's weird, because Aria didn't go to school here, that's not how that happened--you're just holding all of these conflicting ideas in your head all at once.

KEITH: Right, yeah.

AUSTIN: And you like, "so what ever happened to her?" and you go to the, the Wikipedia page for "September Institute". It's, like, super clean and, and it's not about that it's--like it talks about how there's a record...or a, uh, record, you know system class, or sector class Stratus program there, but it doesn't go into the nitty gritty, uh, and there's, like, 'famous graduates'. And Maritime Lapel is a graduate who, who, you know, went to school when you were there. And you click through her name, and you see that she was, uh, she had made a couple of really fantastic exper--no, not experiments, people who, uh, uh...what do you call them? Installation art pieces, uh, with Mesh art. And then...died tragically, at a young age. Um, not...like, *very soon* after she graduated. And then you do the math and you realize that it's, like, pretty soon after you take this test, that she graduates and dies. You know, like a couple of months, at the most.... Yeah. And that kind of snaps you out of this. And you think, "that's not...that fact seems to be real". That person existed and died and went to the September Institute, and you can dial up exactly what her art installations were. But there she is, also, talking to security guards.

KEITH: Well, this is...this can't both be true?

AUSTIN: (laughing) It's a weird place to be in. Um, but if you want to leave, you can leave. Um, um, or you can try to. I don't think...you know this specific thing that Maxine did that got you, that got Cass out of there. Um...AuDy, are you just hanging out? Is that the plan at this point?

JACK: Hello. Um. What can I see out of the window of the cabin?

AUSTIN: It's...it's pouring rain for a little bit, and then it's the beautiful, sunny day. Past that...it's very clear to you that this--and you kind of figured that out previously, that the way that Mesh works is weird here--um, that something close to this house seems to have something that is pushing through the storm.

JACK: I think I'm just going to go inside and drag a chair out onto the covered porch of the cabin, and sit on the covered porch of the cabin. Waiting.

AUSTIN: You wait for twenty, thirty minutes. And I think we get a couple of different shots, here, of like... Aria waiting to see if they've said anything about Paisley, or like, waiting for them to admit him, fully. We get Cass and Maxine moving through the suburbs. Um, with a sniper just missing them--not with bullets, but, like, trying to track them down and they keep dodging through this alleyway or that one, keeping ahead of her--the sniper, the sniper who took shots at you back a couple games ago. We get, um, shots of, of, Orth continuing to sketch something, and it's not like, coming together, uh, quite yet, as a clear image. It's a weird, geometrical figure, um, and then, we get Maryland stepping out with her own chair on the porch. Putting it down, and sitting next to you.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: [long sigh] You came a long way, huh?

JACK [as AuDy]: We did.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: You've seen a lot.

JACK [as AuDy]: You could say that.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: What do you think it's all worth, really? Push comes to shove.

JACK [as AuDy]: Given enough time, that question stops being important.

AUSTIN: She nods slowly.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: What's the question that you ask yourself, then? What is it that [sigh]...why not just shut down? Maybe not permanently, but for a little while. Wait things out. Come back, see something at least a little more novel.

JACK [as AuDy]: You're not thinking about it the right way. Questions are for humans. Divines have statements. Mine is "liberty and discovery".

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: That old trick doesn't work on me. That's a thing me and Ibex figured out.

AUSTIN: And she calls him that.

AUSTIN [as Maryland] [CONT'D]: When we built ours, we realized that...you Divines were *just* machines, really, but also not so different...than us. You tell yourself that what you care about is "liberty and discovery", like it's unavoidable. In the way a workaholic tells himself that the next big project at the office is the only thing that matters. Because there's a conflict there, there's a contradiction. You can't be as powerful as you say you are, all of you. And at the same time, say that you're...leashed, to a couple of words. Who decides what words mean anyway?

JACK [as AuDy]: I'm...worried about my friends.

AUSTIN: And she nods.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: You take good care of them?

JACK [as AuDy]: Not really.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: That boy, Orth. He told me about you. He said you came into his office. Years ago, now. Asking for a ship. Asking for a favor. And he told me that you were...really familiar to him somehow, that he trusted you, right away. Is that a trick you pulled, or...is that boy just naive?

JACK [as AuDy]: We were all different people a long time ago. So was Orth.

AUSTIN: She sips her tea.

AUSTIN [as Maryland]: If you need anything, let me know. I'm going to go back inside before it gets cold.

JACK [as AuDy]: Thank you.

AUSTIN: And then she heads back inside. Uh, the screen door--and it does one of those stutter closes, you know, it's like a "duh-duh" and then it rests, eventually. Um...and it's like what Aria says. It doesn't rain on Counterweight, but it's raining here. And it's not a pretty rain. But there--there's a novelty to the rain, even for you. Is there anything left here? I think, maybe, where we need to end is...coming in through the sun is...Cass, who makes it down to Maryland's home. Being followed by this, this other girl. She's, like, Cass, really inquisitive about where you're going? But, like, up for a surprise.

ART: Sure. And I tell her variations of, like, "we need to meet my friends".

AUSTIN: Right.

ART: Friends from off-world.

AUSTIN [as Maxine]: This place--this place is cute. It sounds like it's raining up there though. That's no good.

[start end theme music]

AUSTIN: And you can see--*you* can see, Cass, up through the woods, the log cabin. And you can see that it's raining there, and not bright and sunny.

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN [as Maxine]: And they don't, they won't...mind meeting me?

ART [as Cass]: I sure hope not.

AUSTIN: She grins.

AUSTIN [as Maxine]: Alright. If you say so.

AUSTIN: And you step into the sun. Or, out of the sun, rather, and into the rain. And she comes with you. AuDy, you recognize something instantly, that there's another Divine in your presence.

[end theme music]

OUTRO:

AUSTIN: Tower does not grow up to be Lazer Ted.

ART: Aw.

AUSTIN: Sorry. Tower is very much not [KEITH laughs] white Riff Raff guy. He's bulkier and, like, more muscly than that. Sadly.

ALI: Also a little bit cooler.

AUSTIN: He's a lot—he's like actually a little bit cool. He's like, less cool? But also a little bit cooler.

ART: Alright, I expect an awful lot of fanfiction about our [AUSTIN: yeah.] alternate universe time at the September Institute. I don't wanna put any pressure, I know writing's hard, but, y'know, if [JACK laughs] anyone out there's thinking about it—

KEITH: Well, there's been a lot of fan art over the course of Friends at the Table, and I know that this might not be how everybody feels about it, but I feel, like, drawing stuff is way harder than writing stuff. [AUSTIN: True.] [JACK: Agreed] You can type out some bullshit in like four minutes.

[ALI laughs]

ART: Well, I think I want like twenty thousand words [cross-talking] I want like the Sorting Hat ceremony.

AUSTIN: Me too.

ALI: Oh, god.

AUSTIN: So badly.

ALI: Gita, hello, thank you.

AUSTIN: Uh huh. So, uh, a couple of days ago I messaged Gita on Twitter and said, "Can I tweet you a secret and you won't tell?" And she said, "yes," and then I told about this stuff. [ALI laughs] So, she's very excited to hear this.

JACK: God.

AUSTIN: It's good. I wish we [JACK sighs] no, it's good. We could've lingered here for as long as we needed. ... Gita tweet that just went live! This needs to stay in the thing. Just, complete—I just went to Twitter, I didn't go to Gita's page, I'm just on

Twitter; four minutes ago Gita Jackson says, "do you think Lazer Ted is good at kissing?"

[ALI and JACK laugh]

AUSTIN: He's very good at kissing. He just hasn't had a lot of practice. [JACK laughs] He's just a natural.

[ALI laughs]

KEITH: You say there's room for improvement but no potential for improvement.

AUSTIN: Correct. There's lots of room for improve—Lazer Ted has lots of rooms.