

COUNTER/Weight 27: An Animal Out of Context

Transcribers: Julian @shipyrd completed first 54min, rowdy @hauntingsim did following 45min, alainpbat did 11min, @MaxXM#5418 standardized full copy & transcribed final 80min

Editor's note: **JACK** is referred to using he/him pronouns during this recording. They now use they/them. Audio has been transcribed as spoken.

[00:00:00] Day 1 Aboard the Kingdom Come

[music plays: "The Tower, As Built By The Divine Candidate Chital" by Jack de Quidt]

AUSTIN: Day 1. As the Seventh Sun breaches the astringent atmosphere of Counterweight, the Kingdom Come flies away through the dark, through the smuggler lanes and hidden ways that will slowly take it towards September. The Chime rests in tense silence.

Day 6. The quiet remains, but it is calmer now. In the cockpit, Orth Godlove rises from the copilot chair, resting a hand briefly on the one remaining shoulder of Automated Dynamics Unit 2-2-7. He moves through the ship, past the crew quarters where Mako Trig rests his head softly against the metal of the cabin wall, shined to a mirror's polish.

The old soldier moves past the common area where Cassander Timaeus Berenice sits, plotting for unexpected eventualities, and towards the ship's ruined hold, where Jacqui Green and Aria Joie start the long work of repairs. Orth grips the hand railing and starts a smile he cannot finish.

Still at the helm, AuDy finishes a process they started long ago. They scan one file, then another, then another. It's a catalog of their past, a collection of actionable information, a self they never knew they were. And then they see it—

Rigour.dat.

[music ends]

[00:01:56] Intro

AUSTIN (cont'd): Hey, everyone. Welcome to Friends at the Table, an actual play podcast focused on critical worldbuilding, smart characterization, and fun interaction between good friends. I am Austin Walker, and we're gonna do a special episode today. Apologies if this is a little echoey. We're doing it in my room— in my living room, me and a special guest. Hi, Jack.

JACK: Hi, Austin. I'm three feet away from you. [laughs]

AUSTIN: It's very strange. And today, we're gonna be doing something— we're gonna be playing a game— uh, you know, it's a game that's still in playtesting. It's a game called The Tower. Briefly it was called The Towers, but now it's called The Tower again, and it is a game about building religions for two weary pilgrims. [**JACK:** Hmm.] I think that that subtitle has changed [**JACK:** Yeah.] by now, too, and it is by— [feigning ignorance] let's see. It is by Jack de Quidt and Austin Walker.

JACK: I've heard about these guys. [laughs]

AUSTIN: This is a game that we designed two years ago [**JACK:** Yeah.] when I was still in Canada. It's a game—

JACK: [crosstalk] Really? Oh yeah, it's before you moved.

AUSTIN: Before I moved, yeah, like, forever ago, and we only ever played it across a sea.

JACK: Yeah, we've played it once or twice with audio.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] We've played it twice— Hmm, once with audio.

JACK: Once with audio. Feels like lots with text.

AUSTIN: Yeah, way more with text. I guess we played it yesterday very briefly.

JACK: Yeah, we played—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Tested it.

JACK: —a version in Starbucks yesterday.

AUSTIN: So, I'm gonna read as always. In this game— [**JACK** laughs] The agenda and stuff— In this game, you will explore mysterious spaces, hunt for relics, build an enormous tower, talk to a Divine— which I wanna be clear [**JACK:** Yeah.] is a thing we wrote two years ago, not for this game.

JACK: Yeah. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: One player is the Pilgrim, brave and curious and lost and confused. One player is the Divine, capricious and loving and wise and confused. [chuckles] To play, you will need two decks of playing cards.

JACK: We have two decks of playing cards that we bought specifically for this.

AUSTIN: We did. Years ago.

JACK: Years ago. [laughs]

AUSTIN: As the Pilgrim, you will leave your tower and embark on a pilgrimage, encounter four trials to be overcome with Dogma, Interpretation— and it still says up here, Jack, it still says Heresy [**JACK:** Oh, wow!] which is wrong. Gonna change that right now [**JACK:** Yep.] to Disappointment, which again, could change. This is a game way early in playtesting, so I wanna be clear this is not a final product—

JACK: [crosstalk] Oh, yeah, totally.

AUSTIN: —but it would be silly for us to have gotten together and not played this.

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah, this is a game— this is a game about talking to Divines, so we gotta play this.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It sure is. You may turn to your Divine in desperation or love and be rewarded.

JACK: Oh, wow.

AUSTIN: You will discover rare and powerful relics, and interpret their meaning.

JACK: Mm-hmm.

AUSTIN: You will then return to your tower and enshrine the relic at the center of a new floor, and you will revere relics for great benefits, or expend them—

JACK: Revere?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Or expend them—

JACK: Ohhh.

AUSTIN: —in times of stress.

JACK: Oh, revere is like the bonuses, I guess.

AUSTIN: Yes. As the Divine, I will watch the Pilgrim leave the tower. I guess we haven't technically decided that yet.

[cat clawing at couch]

JACK: Also what's great is we wrote this stuff before we even began— Hey, cat.

AUSTIN: There's a cat. It's clawing at the couch.

JACK: [crosstalk] Just going at the sofa.

AUSTIN: Alright. As the Divine, you will watch the Pilgrim leave the tower—

[cat continues] [both snicker]

AUSTIN: In this case, the Pilgrim is our cat, Gracie. Test the pilgrim across four trials, describe the relic to the Pilgrim, and listen to their interpretation and actualize it in Dogma, and if they turn to you in desperation, treat them with love, but remember their weakness, and then you will watch the leave— the pilgrim leave the tower.

Note to both players: Sometimes you will need to cede narrative power of your own character to the other player. [**JACK** laughs] The Divine needs to tell the Pilgrim that they walk down the creaky stairway. The Pilgrim needs to tell the Divine that they've blessed them.

JACK: Yeah, so I guess this is a game that doesn't have a GM.

AUSTIN: No, it's a GM-less two-player game, and you know, it's gonna be— it's also setting-agnostic. We kind of wrote it [**JACK:** Yeah.] so that it could be a game that takes place in the arid deserts or in a cyberpunk metropolis. Or we've done a game set on like kind of a magical realistic riverboat [**JACK:** Yeah.] and we did a game that was kind of like— uh, like Puritan America.

JACK: That was our first game. That was... Yeah.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] That was a great game. I love that game a lot. So we're gonna start. Epiphany is the first step [**JACK:** Okay.] on the first turn of the game.

JACK: Oh wait, we should probably say what we're— Should we say what we're playing with here?

AUSTIN: We're about to.

JACK: Okay. Fine. Okay, right, yeah.

AUSTIN: First, choose who will be playing the Pilgrim and who will be playing the Divine.

JACK: We've talked about this. [laughs]

AUSTIN: We have. We've kind of decided.

JACK: Austin will be playing the Divine.

AUSTIN: Yep. And Jack will be the Pilgrim.

JACK: [crosstalk] And I will be playing the Pilgrim.

AUSTIN: The Divine collects two distinct token groups. We are using dice for this. We'd like to be using, like, bingo chips or like, little glass [**JACK:** Yeah.] nubbins. Nibbins? [**JACK:** Yeah.] Nibbins is a name.

JACK: [laughs] A Dickensian character.

AUSTIN: Yeah, uh.

JACK: [crosstalk] Balls of popcorn. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] Popcorn kernels! Popcorn kernels would be really good tokens.

AUSTIN: Sure. They would. Um, one of these sets of tokens is for Dogma and one for Interpretation. The Pilgrim does not yet know how strict a Divine they are. The Pilgrim collects—
[clattering]

AUSTIN: —a pile— that's too much. [laughs] A pile of Disappointment tokens. The Divine immediately sees the stain of potential and past failure in their chosen, yet loves them anyway. The Pilgrim narrates, briefly describing the world, themselves, and how they came across the first relic.

[00:07:09] The First Relic

JACK: Okay. It is a long time ago [**AUSTIN:** Mm.] in what— far away from what we now call the Golden Branch sector. Humanity is, in the grand scheme of things, just beginning to head galactic north towards the cluster of planets that we know. We were talking about this, and we—we banded around numbers like 10,000 years—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Maybe more.

JACK: —or 100,000 years. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] It is a long time ago.

AUSTIN: It's before the first— It's before there was a Diaspora.

JACK: Yes. And there are still things called riggers, except instead of carrying guns, they're armed with cutting lasers and shovels and blades, and a group of— you might call them pioneers, you might call them laborers— are sent to a planet to harvest timber. There are a lot of them. And on this planet, things are very, very bad [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] because something is telling these people exactly how much timber they need to cut, and every day that number is going up, and already we have a name for this thing—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] What do we call it?

JACK: –and it is called Rigour [**AUSTIN:** Hmm.] and we built it. [**AUSTIN:** Mm.] It's really, really bad, and we want more than anything else– Well, we want– we wanna chop down trees. We wanna keep producing, but more than anything else, we want to throw off the yoke that Rigour has us under. I am the pilot of a Mark IV Juggernaut-class rigger. I have a circular saw in my right hand and a cutting laser in my left hand, and every day, I chop down pine trees on a snow-covered planet.

AUSTIN: Where do you first see the relic? Or how do you– how do you first come across it?

JACK: In the morning, when I start up the Juggernaut-class rigger, the splash screen is different.

AUSTIN: Mm.

JACK: Previously, it was known as... the Exploratory Systems Discovery program, and now it is known as the Exploratory Systems Liberty and Discovery program. This is very strange.

AUSTIN: This is very strange. The Divine places the top card of their deck on the table face-up.

[card smacks on table]

JACK: Wow!

AUSTIN: It is a 2 of Diamonds, or in our game, a 2 of Wits. Um...

JACK: That's quite a low value card.

AUSTIN: It is quite a low value card. Accounting for its suit and number, the Divine narrates, describing the first relic and stating their name. The relic is a mapping system. [**JACK:** Hm.] See, normally, your maps are controlled by Rigour. You see where you can go, and– and normally the rigger– your personal mine– er, lumberjack rigger only can have a zone of operation inside of zones that Rigour determines. [**JACK:** Right.]

It automatically, like an automated car, drives you to a place. [**JACK** laughs] It stops, you take control, and then it can operate in that zone. And that is it. [**JACK:** Yeah.] Now you can move wherever you want. [**JACK:** Oh wow.] It is– it is part of the– this is the Liberty in the Liberty and Discovery [**JACK:** Right.] system. I am the Divine of Liberty and Discovery. [**JACK:** Cool.] The pilgrim takes the card and places it at the base of their tower and narrates what they do with it.

JACK: [laughs] I realize that I can move further because I'm pushing up against the edge of what I thought I could do. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] And I've been working for this company for years now. I think– I think I'm maybe 40 or 50. And so what I do is I go, I'm gonna go over here and chop down some trees. [laughs] Still gonna keep chopping, but I'm gonna chop over there.

AUSTIN: Okay. Tithe.

JACK: [nervous] Oh. Okay.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, sorry, no. We missed a step. [**JACK** laughs] This is our game but we're still gonna miss a step. The Pilgrim writes down the first law of their new faith. You interpret what that gift means and decide what law you think your Divine is giving you.

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: Um, I will read from later in our— in our thing, if you have some questions here, unless you have something in mind.

JACK: Oh, um... Um, I wonder whether or not at this point the character... feels that this is just a new directive. [**AUSTIN:** Mm.] Just go chop some more trees from over there. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] So it might be something like— So essentially what we're creating here are... almost 10 commandments-style—

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: Um.

AUSTIN: You will be judged by these laws [**JACK:** Yes.] in the future, by the laws you create based on what you interpret my meaning to be. [**JACK:** Yes.] I will say—This is a thing we include in the text here, which is, if you can't think of anything, try this, which we stole straight on from *Dog Eat Dog*, which is another fantastic game. The rule in *Dog Eat Dog* is, "The Natives are inferior to the Occupation."

That is a law that the Occupation sets [snorts] not a law that the— The Natives again have to— have to set up their own laws from that point forward, but the first one that they are forced to do is, "The Natives are inferior to the Occupation." I don't want that to be the default first law in our case [**JACK:** No.] but it is one that if you can't figure out something else for, you could use that.

JACK: No, so I think I'm going to go for um... "Continually broaden your horizons."

AUSTIN: I like that.

JACK: I'm gonna write this down.

AUSTIN: With pen and paper.

JACK: With pen and paper.

AUSTIN: That's the way. Now, you Tithe. [**JACK:** Yes.] You draw up to a full hand size, which is five, currently.

[drawing cards]

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: And you discard cards of a value equal or greater than the relics you wish to keep active, and briefly narrate what actions you perform in the Divine's name. So you have a 2 of Wits right now, a 2 of Diamonds. That means you have to discard a card of 2 or higher. And then you draw back up.

JACK: Yeah. Um, okay. So I'm going to... draw down— I'm gonna place a 2 of Spades, which in our game, Spades indicate effort. And so what I'm going to do is, after I've realized I can walk into the new sector, I'm going to go back into the previous sector, cut down my required number of trees, and then go into the new sector and cut down my required number of trees again, as though I've been assigned two sectors.

AUSTIN: What do you do with the second set of trees?

JACK: I cut them down.

AUSTIN: But just leave them there.

JACK: Uh, well, what do I generally do? I assume that I cut them down for a secondary unit.

AUSTIN: You cut them down and mark them. Maybe you spray paint them or something, or you tag them so that a second unit will come through later and pick them up.

JACK: Yep. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I like that.

JACK: And then I draw back up.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Now you draw back up. The reason you do that is that if you had not done that, the first thing— the first relic in your tower would have shut down and you would not have access to it, which is in other games like not having access to an ability you have.

JACK: Yeah. Relics do— relics in The Tower do things, and we'll go over what they do later.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Later.

JACK: All you need to know for the moment is that number relics add a plus one— a passive plus one [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] to any of that suit in your hand.

AUSTIN: Totally.

[00:14:58] The Pilgrimage of the Opposite of Alone

AUSTIN (cont'd): Alright, Embark. The Pilgrim narrates, choosing a direction to set out in. For now you can only choose a very limited thing.

JACK: Um, I was just seeing how much you had. I am...

AUSTIN: So, you can say you're going north. So you can say, "I'm going into woods," or, "I'm going to a beach." [**JACK:** Yeah.] Maybe not even that yet.

JACK: Yeah. I'm going to... I'm going to go south.

AUSTIN: Okay. The Divine places the top card of their deck face down as the relic of the next pilgrimage. I have no idea what this card is. It's face down.

JACK: [laughs] This is like a magic trick.

AUSTIN: It is. [laughs] It kind of is. The divine draws four cards.

[drawing cards]

AUSTIN: Okay. The Divine names the pilgrimage. This is the Pilgrimage of the Opposite of Alone. You head south... because there is a new beeping on your GPS. It isn't a beeping of, "Oh, you're supposed to go chop more things down." It's saying that your machine is— has a required service deep on the other side of the woods, in a mountain... what looks like a docking bay, or like a workstation in a mountain on the other side of the woods.

JACK: It's required service in the sense that it has been asked to perform a service [**AUSTIN:** No.] or it needs to be—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It needs to be serviced.

JACK: like an emergency.

AUSTIN: It's like— yeah. And the— this is a place you've never been to before, and it is a place that does not have tracks built to it yet. Normally Rigour sends ahead a group of machines to cut down the path to where things are.

This one does not have that yet, and so it is kind of hard for you to climb through the kind of hilly mountains covered in snow and ice, and to maneuver your rigger in this way. It's not a thing you do normally. You walk around places that have already been cleared out enough for you to walk around and cut down trees. The challenge is a 4 of Effort, 4 of Spades.

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: So the way this game works is that now Jack, who is playing the nameless lumberjack— Tell us— What's your lumberjack look like?

JACK: I think that they...

AUSTIN: Do they have a name yet?

JACK: Um... [sighs]

AUSTIN: Do people who work for Rigour have names?

JACK: No. People who work for Rigour are— they're used for the call sign for their— for their rigger. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] They have no distinct— Rigour doesn't think of them as a person and a rigger, they think of them as—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] But do they refer to each other?

JACK: — a rigger unit. Uh, they refer to each other by the name of their rigger unit. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] So I guess my—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] So you're Juggernaut Mark VII?

JACK: Yes.

AUSTIN: So you're J-M-7?

JACK: Yes.

AUSTIN: ...Oh.

JACK: Yeah, alright. Okay. So I'll go by Jim, I guess.

AUSTIN: Sounds good.

JACK: I have a receding hairline. I have a cap. I think I came to this planet expecting to be a pioneer, so I dressed like a pioneer would. Cap. Shirt. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Braces.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Love it.

JACK: Mid-50s.

AUSTIN: Okay. 4 of Spades, 4 of— 4 of Effort.

JACK: 4 of Effort.

AUSTIN: Jack now has to— Jim now has to discard a card from his hand, equal— among a number of different ways to overcome this obstacle. He can— he can play a card of 4 or greater in the same suit, so he can play a 4 of Spades or higher. If he does that, he'll get a thing called a Dogma point—

[rattling]

AUSTIN: —which in our case is these little orange and black dice.

JACK: These represent me following the teachings of the laws of my Divine as they intended. The Divine has set me a challenge involving effort. I'm gonna meet it with effort.

AUSTIN: Right. You could also play a card of equal or higher value that is a different suit. You could play a 4 or higher of Diamonds— of Wits— and that would mean that you're interpreting the challenge. You're not— you're not acting dogmatically. You're finding some loophole or some— You're saying maybe the challenge is maybe not what it appeared to first be.

JACK: Yes. Or I could play a lower card of any suit.

AUSTIN: No.

JACK: No.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Same suit.

JACK: [crosstalk] Of the same suit [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] and that's a Disappointment token.

AUSTIN: Which you give to me.

JACK: Which I give to Austin. Austin has Dogma and Interpretation, and this represents that I have disappointed...

AUSTIN: You've tried to live up to my hopes.

JACK: [crosstalk] —or I've tried— Yes, and I have failed. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] And if I can't do anything, there are other things that happen.

AUSTIN: And if those come up, we'll talk about them.

JACK: [crosstalk] We'll talk about them, yeah.

AUSTIN: But for now, play a card.

JACK: And describe how I do it. [**AUSTIN:** Yes, yes.] So I'm going to play the 4 of Hearts. Hearts in our game represent courage. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.]

And so what I'm going to do here is I am going to— the lumber— the Juggernaut rigger is completely incapable of working in low brush [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] which is the sort of thing I'm in at the moment. It— it completely blitzes its... It becomes very uncoordinated because usually, it requires lasers to meet on a thing [**AUSTIN:** Sure.] and then it chops it down, and then it does the whole thing. So as soon as it's in the brush, really all it can do is walk, and it can't walk very well.

However, I am going to attempt to start clearing the brush. **[AUSTIN: Okay.]** This is really tricky because I'm essentially asking my— my Juggernaut to do something while it is drunk, or while it's uncoordinated. So I'm hacking at this brush and chopping it down, and I think I might start several small fires with my— with my cutting laser **[AUSTIN: Sure.]** but I make it through.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] But you continue on—

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Okay, that's an Interpretation point.

[rattling]

JACK: Thank you.

AUSTIN: Which is these— these ones.

JACK: Yeah, these are brown. They're really a weird color.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] They're a very strange brown.

JACK: We don't have a lot of these, either.

AUSTIN: No. Let's just— you know what, let's use those as dice. So that's one **[JACK: [laughs] Yeah. Okay.]** Interpretation point, and we'll turn that when necessary. Oop. Pretend you didn't see that card.

[cards shuffling]

JACK: [crosstalk] I didn't see it. Austin—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It's okay.

JACK: [crosstalk] We don't have this problem on Skype.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] We don't. You walk a bit— so you've cleared this fire— or you've cleared this out and you see— you hear something that you've never heard before in these woods. There is a kind of a bellowing call. **[JACK: Hm.]**

The fire has attracted attention, and a thing about the size of your rigger comes down over a nearby hill, rolling into a small ball and then popping up above you, its strange, organic, armored plates glistening in the snow and in the moonlight. It has long claws and it shoves at you once. It's a show of dominance more than a threat. You don't know what this beast is.

[card thumps on table]

AUSTIN: 5 of Clubs.

JACK: Were we ever told that the planet was occupied?

AUSTIN: No— Yes. Only occupied by other people who are in the service of Rigour.

JACK: [crosstalk] There are no aliens on this planet.

AUSTIN: No aliens on this planet.

JACK: I found some aliens on this planet.

AUSTIN: You did. The 5 of Clubs. Clubs in our game is combat— is direct physical conflict.

JACK: Yeah, yesterday we kind of glibly called it kicking.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I kind of think maybe Clubs, now that I think about it. What if we just called it The Clubs? And then—

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah, The Clubs is— It's the most—

AUSTIN: It's already a club.

JACK: [crosstalk] Other than spades, it's the most [**AUSTIN:** Right, yes.] obvious connection. Something that we just never saw while we were— while we were working on this is that the cards are kind of mingling. We have two very different decks of cards—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yes. In sets.

JACK: —and they're kind of mingling on the table and that's really great. Okay, so... so it bellowed at me. [sighs] Okay. I am going to... I'm gonna play a 5 of Diamonds, which is Wits, and what I'm going to do is I'm going to spin up the saw blade, except instead of— That's my discard pile. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah, sorry.] Except instead of attacking with it, I'm going to deliberately lower the torque on it— pitch it down so that it essentially roars.

AUSTIN: Oh, I love it.

JACK: It's the— You know when people play music on floppy disks? [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] I'm doing that with the—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] With your saw blade.

JACK: —with my saw blade, and then with my other shoulder I'm just gonna bump into this— bump into this creature.

AUSTIN: It cowers and retreats.

JACK: Great.

AUSTIN: Take Interpretation to 2.

JACK: Yep. Can't find my... Okay.

AUSTIN: You hear it bellow in the distance as you move forward towards the point, but you quickly find that you've disconnected from your GPS network. You're beyond Rigour's reach. All that is left is the darkness and a single point on your HUD that was stored in your— in the Juggernaut's memory of where you're supposed to go.

It is dark and you have never been outside in the night. Your shifts have always been morning shifts from 4 AM, when the sun first breaches the horizon, until 9 PM, when it finally goes away here. The dark is terrifying, and your rigger has no lights.

[thumps card on table]

AUSTIN: 10 of Courage. 10 of Hearts.

JACK: Hoo. Ahh. Okay. Um... right. So. I fire up my cutting laser [**AUSTIN:** Mm.] and I set fire to some brush. And then I set fire to some more brush, and I'm in a— I'm in a Juggernaut-class rigger, there isn't— I'm on a snow planet [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] in a Juggernaut-class rigger. I'm not worried about setting this thing on fire. [**AUSTIN:** chuckles]

And after a while, all around me, the forest is burning. And it's— it's bright out. I've never... This is a planet for resources [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] and I'd feel worse about burning them if I was told that this was a sector we were clearing. [**AUSTIN:** Right.] I have not been told that. [**AUSTIN:** Ooh.] Oh, sorry, wait— wait.

[shuffling cards]

AUSTIN: So the King of—

JACK: [crosstalk] King of Clubs.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] —Clubs. Hmm.

JACK: Because I'm— I'm fighting. I'm— I'm burning things.

AUSTIN: Yeah, but only if... I'll only give that to you if also you hear the calling of those things.

JACK: [crosstalk] Of the— the things. Yeah, totally.

AUSTIN: Yeah, okay.

JACK: Absolutely. The— [laughs] Yeah. The picture on my King is a bear with a salmon.

AUSTIN: That's perfect.

JACK: Yeah, so— so I hear— yeah, I hear the sound of...

AUSTIN: Of their– their cries.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: You know, regardless of whether or not you kill them directly, you're ruining their habitat [**JACK:** Yeah.] which, hey, maybe you would have done eventually anyway.

JACK: Well, we super would have done eventually, right? Also maybe they're inflammable.

AUSTIN: Yeah, who knows. They had that–

JACK: [crosstalk] They're aliens.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] The armored plating, right? You get to the point on your HUD, and as you get closer, your systems come back online. [**JACK:** Ha.] The interior of your– of your rigger is lit up again by the dashboard, but the point is pointing at what looks like a side of a mountain.

JACK: Huh.

AUSTIN: That's all that's there. Queen of Spades. Queen of Effort.

JACK: Hm. I'm playing another Queen of Effort. [**AUSTIN:** Ooh.] And as I get closer, I see that that's not quite the case. There is a thin crack. And... So first I try and flake it away with my cutting laser, but it's not a mining laser. It's– this thing is for cutting down wood, and certain sorts of wood, as well. And then I try and force my saw blade into the gap... and spin that. And that doesn't work until I begin to apply pressure to it, at which point about a third of the blade comes away, but the crack expands and opens up.

AUSTIN: Alright. That was the final trial. Step 4, Claim. The Divine flips the relic card over, then narrates, explaining what it is and how the Pilgrim receives it.

JACK: [crosstalk] So again, before Austin turns this card over, Austin has no idea what card this is–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I have no idea what this is.

JACK: [crosstalk] –and what the relic is going to be is going to be incredibly determined [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] on its value and its suit. So this is–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] A 2 of–

JACK: [crosstalk] entirely improv.

AUSTIN: A 10 of Clubs is going to be a different thing than a 2 of Diamonds [**JACK:** Yep.] which we've already seen.

[playing a card]

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: There's a 4 of Clubs. What was the thing that broke?

JACK: About a third of my saw blade.

AUSTIN: Okay. So you... you cut through the little crack that's there, and it gives away, and there is the sound of stones falling and echoing. They echo loudly, not just behind you, but in front of you, because the cave opens up into a passageway. And the— the passageway opens up into a hangar. And the hangar has another few riggers, sort of like yours. One of them has a... You know what, no. It's not a new saw blade. I'm gonna keep going.

You get out of your rigger, and you move through this facility. It is empty of people, but filled with the things people would have had. Shoes and letters home. Bracelets and uncooked meals. And there is a bit of blood. It's mostly been cleaned, but there is a bit. And in one room, you see a— a single... screen on with a sort of logo on it, an L and a D. The D is holding the L close. They are intimate for a logo.

And when you walk more closely to it, you see that it is in the middle of repairing your rigger, parked in the hangar [**JACK:** Huh.] and replacing the saw blade automatically with something new. It is like the— the saw blade you had before, but it detaches and unfolds, and it can be disconnected from that— from that arm and launched.

JACK: Oh, wow.

AUSTIN: There's— there's kind of like data that comes up on the screen and it says like, "Oh, this is for, like, cutting down trees that are hard to reach."

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: You know.

JACK: [laughs] Yeah.

AUSTIN: So it's a— it is a saw blade that is like a throwable saw blade.

JACK: I think I'm probably— I know... Having seen the startup screen [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] and having seen the screen here, I think I know that this thing is called Liberty and Discovery [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] but I guess I assume that the reason this thing showed up is that this is just an old facility. It's just some glitch that is...

AUSTIN: I should give you more then [**JACK:** Okay.] which is... it pulls that weapon off of another machine [**JACK:** Huh.] and in doing so, on the screen it shows the face of a young woman, and it says KIA underneath it [**JACK:** Huh.] and then your face appears, and it says... it says a name you don't recognize because you've never heard it before.

JACK: Okay. Great. Cool.

AUSTIN: And it says... you know, "New operative engaged."

JACK: Great. Right. Yeah, that absolutely— that is very different.

AUSTIN: Yes. The Pilgrim takes the relic and adds it to their other cards making up the tower, then narrates, explaining what they do with the relic and how the nearby area changes [**JACK** exhales] as the tower grows. The Divine will eventually start narrating too, but not yet.

JACK: To be clear, "tower" in this game is a metaphor. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yes. Well, it might be the rigger.

JACK: Oh, no. [chuckles] Just— We have just been calling it the tower.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, yeah, sorry.

JACK: We're not building a tower.

AUSTIN: We're not building a tower. We— you know, there are times when it's been a church. [**JACK:** Yeah.] There are times when it's been— In that one game, the tower was just the cabin [**JACK:** Mhm.] on the deck. But it could also be a tower. It could totally be a tower.

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah, I think it was a tower in the first game, in the Puritan village.

AUSTIN: Mm-hmm. [**JACK:** Yeah.] I think it— Well, it was a church.

JACK: [crosstalk] It was the— It was the church. Yeah, but in this, the tower is, I think, absolutely the rigger— [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] the Juggernaut rigger. Okay, so I think that... it's incorporated for me [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] in the— in the... the saw blade in my left arm.

And I think... that as I leave the... base [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] the creature that I met earlier is waiting for me outside. And without really thinking about it, I just deploy the saw [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] into one of its spines and keep moving. And as I keep moving, without even thinking about it, the saw detaches itself and comes and joins me again [**AUSTIN:** Nice.] once it's— once it's finished. I didn't even see what happened.

AUSTIN: Yeah. The name, by the way, that it gives you, starts to feel good in your mouth. It's Chital. C-H-I-T-A-L. The Pilgrim now writes a new law of their faith based on the experience that the Divine has given them, their challenges, and the new relic.

JACK: [inhales] The new law is— I'm thinking something about discovering hidden things, or uncovering buried things.

AUSTIN: I like that.

JACK: I wanna work out how to phrase that as a law. I guess— I guess, “Look for hidden things.”

AUSTIN: And what was your first one?

JACK: The— “Continually broaden horizons.”

AUSTIN: Okay.

[typing]

AUSTIN: We are now in the Judgement phase. In Judgement, the Divine reflects on the actions the Pilgrim took during and after the previous pilgrimage. They silently read through the following text and then secretly amass a set of tokens, handing them over all at once as not to show the Pilgrim the source of these points. The Divine can narrate here, but it is not required.

This also has to change because we’ve recently changed the rules so that if you— if you get Disappointment, I take the tokens, not you. [**JACK:** Yep.] I’m gonna read these out loud this time, instead of reading them silently.

JACK: [crosstalk] I don’t— I can barely remember these rules. This is gonna be fun.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yeah, okay. If the Pilgrim lived up to their own laws, give one Dogma point. If they found loopholes in their own laws, give one Interpretation point. If they broke their own laws, give one Disappointment point— or take one Disappointment point.

If they impressed you with their actions during their pilgrimage, give one Dogma point. If they shocked with their actions, give one Interpretation point. If they disappointed you with their actions, give one Disappointment point. We need to— Again, alpha.

If they honored your relics, give one Dogma point. If they coveted your relics’ power, give one Interpretation point. If they disavowed or distanced themselves from your relic, give one Disappointment point.

If they made a new law in your image, give one Dogma point. If they made a new law in your collective image, yours and theirs, give one Interpretation point. If they made a new law in their image, give one Disappointment point.

Now I’m going to read them over silently and determine how many points.

JACK: My first relic is the 2 of Diamonds, and it is the system that allows me to [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] move, which I guess is just Liberty and Discovery. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] My second relic is the 4 of clubs, and it is my detachable saw blade.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Saw boomerang?

JACK: My detachable saw boomerang.

AUSTIN: I love that in one of our games it was like— your relics were, like, an old radio. [**JACK** laughs] Like, a nice mirror. And this time it's A Weapon.

JACK: And a— and a thing that lets me go and use that weapon on other things. I think that once I fire this— I don't know how you feel about this— I think that once I fire the saw boomerang, I can't control it. I can point it in a direction [**AUSTIN:** Hmm.] and I just sort of have to trust that it—

AUSTIN: Yeah, that it gets there.

JACK: —goes in that direction and does what I want it to.

AUSTIN: Take— Oop, sorry. One more Dogma. [**JACK** laughs] Three Dogma, and increase your Interpretation by one.

JACK: Thanks. [rattling] Do you want any Disappointment?

AUSTIN: Do I want what?

JACK: Do you want any Disappointment?

AUSTIN: No, no. [**JACK:** Oh, cool!] That's it. That's it for this one. Alright. I don't think I'm gonna narrate anything else here. Alright. Now we wrap back around to tithing.

JACK: Uh-huh. So I draw up to my hand size.

AUSTIN: Mhm.

[cards shuffling]

JACK: Okay. Now what I have to do is if I want— Again, if I want these relics to remain active, I have to spend cards that are equal or surpass.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] In value. So you need something that's higher than a 2 and something that's higher than a 4.

JACK: If I have very high cards, which I don't, I can spend more than one card to match.

AUSTIN: Right, so if he had a King, he could spend—

JACK: Like a 10.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] A Jack— a 10 and a 2.

JACK: Yeah. Okay.

AUSTIN: And for— now that we're here, now that you've seen how the trials work, I can explain. For each card in the tower of a certain suit, any other cards in the pilgrim's hand of that suit gain a +1 passive. So right now Chital has a +1 to Wits challenges and a +1 to Clubs challenges.

JACK: I really like Clubs.

AUSTIN: Me too. I don't know how we missed it. It was right there.

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah, it's good. It's on the card. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Okay. So— and generally the way we talk about this is when I expend it, I explain what I do [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] to expend it almost, but more importantly, I very literally relate that to the value of the card [**AUSTIN:** Right.] so for example if I play a 3, I do three things, or I do something three times—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It's like—

JACK: [crosstalk] —or it takes three days.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It's like the priest telling you, "Say three Hail Marys."

JACK: Yes, exactly. Right. So I'm going to keep my 2 of Wits by... [laughs] That night, one of the other rigger pilots asks me where I was that day, and I say—

(as Chital): I was in my quadrant.

JACK: And then they say—

(as rigger pilot): No, you weren't, were you?

JACK: And I say—

(as Chital): I was in my quadrant.

JACK: So I repeat that twice. [**AUSTIN** chuckles] Then to pay off my saw blade... Oh [laughs] this one's real easy. I'm gonna play a 4 of Effort. [excited] I have a detachable saw blade. So my— my haul— my ability to chop down trees goes up significantly more. I chop down four times as many trees. Because I can be working with my cutting laser, and my blade is off just doing other stuff.

AUSTIN: [disappointed] And this is how you honor my— my relics. Okay.

[music plays: "All of the Different Trees That There Are" by Jack de Quidt]

[Jack laughs]

JACK: I don't know anything about you.

AUSTIN: You know a couple things.

JACK: Well, you've given me a saw blade.

AUSTIN: Mm.

[00:37:55] Day 13 Aboard the Kingdom Come

[music begins fading away]

AUSTIN: Day 13. The quiet is pushed aside by the low, distant sound of a bass line and involuntary dancing. As the Kingdom Come drifts further away from Counterweight, Aria, where are you?

ALI: Uh, I think that Aria is trying to clean the ship [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] because it was left in a horrible mess [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] and I think that when she's nervous, that's what she does.

AUSTIN: Okay. That's— that's a really good image. [**ALI** laughs] I like that a lot. You know, it's a mess, but it's not dirty, it's just messy, right?

ALI: Right.

AUSTIN: There's not, like, stains. There wasn't—

ALI: [crosstalk] No, no, no, yeah.

AUSTIN: There wasn't a fight. There's no food stains anywhere. It's just— There's paperwork everywhere, and chairs got tossed around, and the fuel canisters are not where they are supposed to be. [**ALI** laughs] And you notice when you're kind of moving through one of the— one of the— the main corridor, which is kind of bordered by the different crew quarters, the faint sound of music coming from behind one of the doors. It's your door.

ALI: Oh. That's weird.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh.

ALI: Um, I go into my room?

AUSTIN: Spread out across the floor are a bunch of old posters of Aria Joie. And there's an old— one of your first pop songs is playing in your room. And Jacqui Green just has, like, the fucking— like, most wild look on her face. [**ALI** laughs]

(as Jacqui Green): You're— you're the pop star.

ALI (as Aria Joie): Yeah.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): You're Aria Joie. [laughs]

ALI (as Aria): [laughs] Yeah. Did you— you didn't know that?

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): I thought it was a— I thought it was a— like a disguise.

ALI (as Aria): [laughs] No, that— that's me. In the flesh.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): Then [sighs] shouldn't you be on Joypark?

ALI (as Aria): No, I— I— come on. Aren't you a fan?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] She leans in and like looks a little more closely, like—

(as Jacqui): are you really Aria Joie?

ALI (as Aria): Of— of course I am. It's Aria and the Brilliance. You've— you've seen me.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): All right, then who's Verren Roth?

ALI (as Aria): I— no one.

AUSTIN: She's like digging through stuff she's already dug through while you were busy cleaning the ship.

(as Jacqui): It says here— this says Verren Roth.

ALI (as Aria): [sighs] Yeah, and?

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): So, if you were really Aria Joie, then this wouldn't say that.

ALI (as Aria): [sighs heavily]

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): I think— I think you're just another big fan, and maybe you're a little... twisted. Which is fine. I— I don't mind. Twisted's fun sometimes. But I just need to be clear with who— who I'm on the ship with.

ALI (as Aria): When EarthHome hired me, I became Aria Joie. And that's who I am now.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): So you just, like, let them change your name?

ALI (as Aria): Yeah, I— I wanted a job and working at EarthHome was my dream, and— I was hired to be Aria Joie. And that's who I am. The— the— the— Aria and her Brilliance and the— the— the— [sighs] the inspiration and all of that, that's who I am.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): But wha— but you're not. Like, you didn't— you're not the one on that stage, so why do you still use the name?

ALI (as Aria): I— It's mine. [sighs]

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): I thought EarthHome made it up. Aren't you just like a— like a cartoon?

ALI (as Aria): [sighs] I— This is who I've been for 10 years, and it's a part of me. A-and yeah, I— [sighs] I don't know. They— they can make other movies and other songs, I guess, but I— I'm Aria Joie.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): I don't know. It's just, you know, they gave me a name too, the people who, you know. And— and I didn't have another name before that. I think if I had one, I would just— I would want that one again.

ALI (as Aria): [sighs] What, you don't like Jacqui Green? I think it's kind of cute.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): It's... it's fine.

AUSTIN: She like absent-mindedly runs a hand through her hair and it's a weird thing, because right now, you know, her hair is purple. But you can see her roots are green. And you know, you're no psychologist, but the way she moves her hand through her hair might communicate something. [Ali laughs]

(as Jacqui): Anyway, if you're really Aria Joie, then you should be making music. I don't want to listen to a fake Aria Joie song. I grew up listening to real Aria Joie songs.

ALI (as Aria): I didn't realize you were a fan. This is so exciting. Um, I—

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): Do you have like a— like a— like a computer somewhere filled with songs that were never released?

ALI (as Aria): Yeah, I— I've been releasing stuff, but with Joypark making its own music, it's— it's been kind of weird, and I've been—

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): [crosstalk] Yo, fuck them. We're gonna release a new song. Play me something.

ALI (as Aria): [crosstalk] We're going to what?

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): Play me something. Play me something.

ALI (as Aria): [laughs] I— um— I— Uh, this is so much. Sure. Sure. Fine. I— ugh. You came all the way here, right? I— I owe you that much. And—

AUSTIN: She, like, sits on your bed cross-legged. And like, she's big. Again, she has, like, big muscly legs. [Ali laughs] And she has like, really good posture also.

ALI: Aria kind of, like, looks at her and, like, is wondering if she's just joking or not, but she, like clearly is not and excited to hear this [AUSTIN: Yes.] so she kind of walks over to her computer console or whatever and starts clicking around and like—

(as Aria) I don't know. What— what do you want the mood to be?

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): I don't know. The best Aria Joie songs are like, um— they're exciting and they're hopeful, and— I don't know. There's something about them— she's such a—

ALI (as Aria): I'm such a.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): Right. You're— uh [chuckles]. It's strange. The best Aria Joie songs make me forget how bad things are. That's all.

ALI: Aria kind of... smiles. And she nods really slowly and she kind of looks through some more files and starts, like, playing what's just a— I guess it's just like a backtrack without vocals on it yet [**AUSTIN**: Mhm.] and she kind of lets it play for a little bit and then looks at Jacqui and tries to figure out what she's thinking.

AUSTIN: That sounds like a roll to me. [**ALI** laughs] I think that's Assess.

ALI: Sure.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh.

ALI: We're still playing a game, after all.

AUSTIN: Yup. When you closely study a person, place, or situation, or when you quickly size up an opponent or a charged situation, roll Edge. [**ALI** laughs] Oh, look at that. That's a 10.

ALI: Oh, fantastic. Of course it is.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Gain 3 hold. In the ensuing action, you may spend 1 hold at any time to ask the MC a question from the list below if your examination could have revealed the answer. The MC may ask you questions to clarify your intent. [**ALI** laughs] Take +1 forward when acting on the answers.

What potential complications do I need to be wary of? What do I notice despite an effort to conceal it? How is Jacqui vulnerable to me? How can I avoid trouble or hide here? What is my best way in/way out/way past? Where can I gain the most advantage? Who or what [laughing] is my biggest threat in the situation? [**ALI** laughs] Who or what is in control here?

ALI: Uh, what do I notice despite an effort to conceal it?

AUSTIN: Jacqui Green is actually, like... incredibly uncomfortable. Um, she is in over her head and is desperate to hang onto something because suddenly she's not part of her— Not only is she not part of her tag team hitman duo— hitwoman duo, not only is she no longer part of the squad she was in command of from Horizon Tactical, now she's on a ship nowhere near Counterweight, where she works, and she's in the bedroom of a pop star [**ALI** giggles] that she's been listening to for the better part of a decade. And she's trying very hard not to show it.

ALI: That adds up.

AUSTIN: Her posture is too good.

ALI: I hate the wording of this, but where can I gain the most advantage?

AUSTIN: Uh, yeah. I get why you hate the wording of it. Um, the best thing that you could do— The thing that you could do to create a connection between you and her would be to let her into the creative process or to share something that no one else— that at least you say no one else has heard before.

And the best way you could get in is to go forward on that and like— this isn't a private thing— is to like, if you like uploaded some shit to Soundcloud right now with her in the room, that would be like the dopest thing in her life [**ALI** laughs] and would calm her the fuck down because it would distract her. Again, you know, this is like, "Oh, do you wanna hear me launch a new song?" Like what?

ALI: OK. That's adorable. Um.

AUSTIN: The way she reveals that she wants to keep being involved at that point is, like, when you put on that backbeat, she's like immediate— like again, a little too fast. She's like—

(as Jacqui): This is good. Why haven't you put this out?

ALI (as Aria): I— I—

AUSTIN: The hook hasn't even played yet. Like, there's nothing yet.

ALI (as Aria): [laughs] I've been busy. It's— it's fine. Um—

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): You've been busy shooting at people.

ALI (as Aria): I— I didn't sh—

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): God, Aria Joie is a killer.

ALI (as Aria): I never shot at you once.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): That's not true.

ALI (as Aria): Mm— I shot at your feet like twice. But I really— I really didn't wanna hurt you.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): I like my feet.

ALI (as Aria): I— I— Yeah, they're fine.

AUSTIN: She scoffs. [**ALI** laughs]

ALI: I— OK. I'm gonna ask what potential complication do I have to be wary of, but like, don't give me the obvious one.

AUSTIN: That's— you can't do that. You can't say, "Don't give me the obvious one."

ALI: I mean—

AUSTIN: Um, yeah, like I can give you the— it depends on what you think the obvious one is, right?

ALI: I mean, the obvious one is that she just lost the— the person who's closest to her.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yes. Yes. Um, there's more, which is like— Also she's a person, and you're cohabitating, and it is very hard to meet the people who you've admired for a long time, and realize that they are people first and idols second.

There's something else. There's another thing that's a complication you need to be wary of, which is it strikes me that for a long time, Aria Joie has had very clear but abstract ideals. It is very easy to believe in fixing the world and then to do nothing because you have no material connection to the world that needs to be fixed. But the second that you have someone that can be impacted by that world, either your ideals bend so that they will not be hurt, or they push you to do something so that you can make it better for them.

And that is— I feel like maybe there's just— in the episode, in the kind of visual language, there is just a shot of Aria recognizing that she— that caring about Jacqui actually makes her incredibly vulnerable. It's like one of those looks that goes from like, "Oh, she's so cute," to like, "Oh, no. This isn't good."

ALI: [laughs] I took her in space on this fucking **[AUSTIN: Yeah, uh-huh.]** weirdo adventure and I am now responsible. **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** Oh, god.

AUSTIN: And like, is it— Yeah, yeah.

ALI: So I think Aria sort of lets the beat play for a little bit and like **[AUSTIN: Mhm.]** kind of opens up the Soundcloud login screen, or whatever **[AUSTIN: Mhm.]** to be like—

(as Aria) Yeah, I— the last song that I put out was this one, but it came out right after that new song that EarthHome just put out, so it's been kind of controversial. But whatever, we don't have to talk about that. I— What do you— What do you wanna sing about?

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): I don't— I don't know. I just— uh, what do I like? I like— I like, um, I like dancing. I like— I like explosions a lot. **[ALI laughs]** Um, uh, I like— I like June. Like, that's just like a good month.

AUSTIN: Whatever the equivalent of June on Calliope, really, is what— she says the word. She says June and I think it's probably— you know how in America if we say July, that immediately

conjures images of, like, “Oh, fireworks and barbecues.” And like, “Oh, it’s July. That means that’s this sort of month.” **[ALI: Right.]** If we say December— if I say, think about December.

I think that the way space months work— one of the ways they work here, at least— is that most people don’t know what all of the different seasons are on all of the different major planets. But everyone knows one or two special things about one or two planets, right? And so, you know, everyone knows about the beautiful winter month on the planet of Garden where, for nine months out of the 10-month year, it is this beautiful spring. And then there’s this one month of just fierce winter storms for a week, and then it’s just a beautiful winter playground for the remaining three weeks.

Everybody knows the name of that month. No one knows what the third spring month is like, but everyone knows what that one is. **[ALI: Right.]** Um, and the one that she just said is like, on Calliope, every June-equivalent, there is just like lots of— um, lots of open-air concerts and lots of like, you know, markets in the streets, and there’s a big fashion show. It’s like Space LA at its most aggressively high-art-high-fashion-punk-out-there month. And that is what the third thing she says.

ALI: Aria kind of hops up so that she’s sitting on her desk **[AUSTIN: Mhm.]** and then kind of gestures for Jacqui to come closer to her. And then—

[music begins: “Love’s First Explosion” by Jack de Quidt]

AUSTIN: She does.

ALI: She presses some things on her bracelet and a little microphone comes up, and it just (laughing) protrudes out.

AUSTIN: Good. Perfect.

ALI: Um, and she— she kind of looks Jacqui in the eye, and she’s like—

(as Aria) You’re gonna have to explain why you were going through all of my stuff, but this is a really good idea. Um... Explosions. [chuckles] Of course you like explosions.

AUSTIN (as Jacqui): Big fan. **[ALI laughs]**

AUSTIN: I think that’s probably the scene, and then the new Aria Joie song plays in the hall. It’s just like other shots of the Kingdom Come while this Aria Joie song about explosions and dancing and June plays.

[00:54:12] The Pilgrimage of the Morning Sun

[music begins fading away]

AUSTIN: All right. The Pilgrim draws up to full size... **[JACK: Okay.]** Hand. New relic is on the table. I still don't know what it is. What direction are you going in?

JACK: I am going to go... uh, really, at this point, do we basically— north, south, east— are we basically cardinal directions? At this first stage?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] No, you can do anything basic. As the tower grows, you'll get more control over where you go, basically **[JACK: Yup.]** but, at the lowest phase, it is, "I go north," or "I took the subway." **[JACK: Ohhh, okay.]** **AUSTIN:** You don't get to tell me where that goes.

JACK: [crosstalk] Sure, right. Okay, there are power lines and I follow them.

AUSTIN: Hm. Okay. [sighs] Okay. This is the pilgrimage... This is the Pilgrimage of the Morning Sun. In the middle of the day, the sun high in the sky, you get a new notification, and it is in the direction of the power lines— power lines you've never noticed before. They head east, through the trees, and into the distance.

The ground there becomes increasingly icy, to the point where eventually, you break through the trees, and you realize you're standing on a frozen lake. Your rigger is not designed to walk on water, whether it's frozen or otherwise. The power lines continue overhead, draped across the length of the lake. 9 of Effort.

JACK: [sighs] Hm. How direct is my communication with my bosses?

AUSTIN: Tell me.

JACK: Okay. So I think I have... I think that there are— I think that there are about three tiers above me, and then there's Rigour. If it was only humans operating this plant, the boss may have four quadrants that she needs to worry about. But she has 250. Do we call Rigour a Divine, at this point? **[AUSTIN: No.]** We just call it Rigour. It's— Or no, we call it— The, um... What do we call it?

AUSTIN: I think it's the Rigour System.

JACK: [reticent] Yeah... I wonder whether or not Rigour is too dystopian at this point.

AUSTIN: No... It comes across like austerity does now for some people. **[JACK: Mm.]** For those who already have a great deal of power, they hear it, and they go, "Oh, yes, those people do need to be more rigorous, don't they?"

JACK: But for me, it has exactly the same—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You go, "Jesus Christ".

JACK: —It has exactly the same resonance as it will 100,000 years into the future **[AUSTIN: Right.]** of just like, this thing's... Pfft. **[AUSTIN: Yes.]** So, I'm going to contact my boss **[AUSTIN:**

Mhm.] who I think is in a lumberjacking rigger. **[AUSTIN: Okay.]** She's just gotta keep going. And, uh, as breezily as I can, I'm gonna say—

JACK (as Chital): Uh, this is Pioneer Unit Chital, I'm at a frozen lake... I'm gonna need some assistance here.

JACK: I'm playing an Ace of Wits.

AUSTIN: Hm. What's the assistance you're asking for?

JACK: [laughs] I don't know, I— I— I need them to give me some means of crossing this lake.

AUSTIN: I think you have to give me more than that.

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: The player playing the Divine, the player playing the Divine can...

JACK: [crosstalk] [excited] Oh! Oh! Oh! I wanna— I wanna— I wanna call the pathfinding— the pathfinding robots! **[AUSTIN: Okay.]** That would have come... That— That— **[AUSTIN: Sure.]** —clear the stuff.

AUSTIN: Okay, great.

JACK: I think those are automated.

AUSTIN: They are.

JACK: [crosstalk] Are those automated?

AUSTIN: Those are automated and they are hovering. They hover in front of you. They hover around you.

JACK: [crosstalk] Oh, so she— she believes me?

AUSTIN: You played an Ace of Wits. **[JACK: Okay.]** It's an Ace. I'm not gonna argue with an Ace. **[JACK chuckles]** I could. I could argue, but I said, "No, it's too much." She does say, uh—

AUSTIN (as boss): Chital... what... [confused noise, sigh]

AUSTIN: And she looks over at the number of her quotas, right? **[JACK chuckles]** Like, she has to turn in so many—

AUSTIN (as boss): Oh, yeah, there's a— I guess there's a big haul over there... Uh, one moment... Chital...

AUSTIN: Like, okay. She's like, "I must have missed somebody," right? [**JACK:** Yeah.] Like, "I can't even ask the question." [**JACK:** Yeah.] And the thought of there being someone not where they're supposed to be is so unlikely [**JACK:** Yes.] that it's easy to believe a lie. So these little drones hover around you, and they spray this silvery goo that hardens, over the... [**JACK** laughs.] –over the ice– over the lake, and you take a step forward and start hovering over it, just a few feet off the ground. [**JACK:** Oh, wow.] And it propels you. You slide to the other side.

JACK: We don't have this technology anymore. In what we consider the Golden Branch System, this technology is gone.

AUSTIN: There's something–

JACK: [crosstalk] I mean there's...

AUSTIN: No, there's something like it.

JACK: Oh, really? [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] Have we met it? [**AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] Oh, is it the line-sprayers that the... the things use?

AUSTIN: Not as nice as these, though.

JACK: No. Because something happened to this tech. This is gone.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It's just... Yeah. It's gone.

JACK: [crosstalk] 100,000 years is a long time.

AUSTIN: It's a long time. There's some better tech in between.

JACK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. [laughing]

AUSTIN: So you get to the other end. You hop off onto the snow, and it feels good. Things land with a nice, like [onomatopoeia] Clump. Clank. And you take a few steps forward, and you see that the– that the– the hill– where the, kind of, land turns into a hill, that starts to go downwards, and you take a few steps down the hill.

And then you see, like, "Oh, this hill keeps going down," and eventually, it goes down at a very rapid rate. [**JACK** chuckles] It is a cliff face [**JACK:** Hmm.] facing down, and in front of you, in the distance, the snow disappears. But for now, you have to deal with this hill. 2 of Effort.

JACK: Okay. [chuckles] Okay. What was the– You showed me a great picture of a Gundam mech the other day, which has those two... [chuckles]

AUSTIN: It was a– It was like a– a converted Zaku... like, was turned into a big construction vehicle.

JACK: Yeah, that just looks amazing, yeah. I kind of, to an extent, I picture the— I think it has legs. I don't think it has caterpillar tracks.

AUSTIN: No, I think it has legs.

JACK: [crosstalk] Cause otherwise it'd be fine—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You think it has big, graspy arms, and not like...

JACK: Um, I think— We're recording with this— **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** Yeah, with an angle- placed mound. I think it can pivot. **[AUSTIN: Okay.]** It's the sort of thing a Thunderbird might have to rescue **[AUSTIN: Sure.]** at some point, y'know? **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]**

And inside the cockpit, I have a photo of my family back home. Um, I have my hat. **[AUSTIN: Mhm.]** I have a glass of, like, a... liquid chit that was deployed to me in the morning when I arrived inside the body of the rigger, and I have a check that I haven't had any time to cash yet. **[AUSTIN chuckles]** I really need to cash this check **[AUSTIN: Yes.]** and I just can't.

AUSTIN: It also definitely cashes in company credit.

JACK: Yes! Oh, oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Totally.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You can't spend it anywhere except for— Yeah.

JACK: Yeah. Did you read about Fordlandia? The—

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Yeah, I think that this is a real Fordlandia situation.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yes. Yeah. In general— **[JACK chuckles]** If you're curious about what the inspiration for Rigour is, it is— it is—

JACK: [crosstalk] Is it Henry Ford?

AUSTIN: —Taylorism and Fordism. **[JACK: Yeah.]** It is those practices. Scientific management.

JACK: Okay. So what I do is I brace myself against the inside of my cabin, and I just keep walking. **[AUSTIN: Okay.]** 3 of Effort. **[AUSTIN: Okay.]**

[card thumps on table]

JACK: And as I go, stuff just begins to fall inside my cabin. The liquid goes all over my lap. **[AUSTIN chuckles]** It's just - I think I basically go down this cliff as ignominiously as possible. **[AUSTIN: Perfect.]** But I go down.

AUSTIN: So. You reach the bottom.

JACK: Oh, that was at 3 of Courage.

AUSTIN: Thank you. You reach the bottom, and the land at the bottom of the cliff is this other material. It's— I guess it's sort of like snow, but it's dry, and instead of being white, it's a kind of tan color. It's packed tightly, and off in the distance, it moves in dunes, and the wind blows it. [JACK chuckles] And the second that your feet touch it, a strange magnetic wave takes over, and erases all of the data [JACK laughs] of what direction you're supposed to be traveling in. The power lines have stopped above you. They do not come down here. 5 of Wits.

[card smacks on table]

JACK: So, I assume I'm out of contact range.

AUSTIN: Absolutely.

JACK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And this is destroyed equipment. Yeah. Um, okay... [chuckles] Okay. I'm gonna place a 10 of Effort. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to open the cockpit. This is not allowed. [AUSTIN: Mhm.] You're not allowed to do this. And the moment I open it, it is incredibly hot. So hot. And then I climb onto the roof of my rigger, and I open up the panels that contain the stuff. You are also not allowed to do this! [AUSTIN: No.] This is like voiding your Apple warranty, but really bad. I mean, worse.

Um, and eventually, through fiddling around with what I believe is the communications equipment, the screen turns back on. Except beforehand, when it showed the Liberty and Discovery logo and then went back to the traditional interface, this time it shows the Liberty and Discovery logo and the whole screen is completely different. I don't understand what is showing on my screen anymore. [AUSTIN: Hm.] Um... I don't know whether or not it has a textbox or something on it, but even if it did, I wouldn't have any idea what it said. I wonder whether or not

—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Do you know how to read?

JACK: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. [AUSTIN: Okay.] I've moved here. [AUSTIN: Okay.] I wasn't born on this planet, I've come here. [AUSTIN: Okay.] So that was a 10 of Effort.

AUSTIN: Okay, I can live with that [Jack: Oh!] because you got outside, and it was hot, and laborious. This was not—

JACK: [crosstalk] Also the panel that I took off, I lost the screws. They're just down there.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Okay, and they're down...

JACK: [crosstalk] So it's just hanging off the side.

AUSTIN: When they build these riggers, they build them for the environment they build them for. [JACK laughs] Which is to say, when you build a machine that needs to work in the snow, you do not have to worry about it overheating. But here, in the deserts of this planet, you do. [JACK laughs into a cup] And some wise pilgrim opened the cockpit [JACK chuckles] letting all the cool air that was once there out.

JACK: Oh, I bet I disabled the AC as well, with the...

AUSTIN: What AC? No. You li— No.

JACK: I wouldn't need one.

AUSTIN: There's an HVAC— There's like a circulation system [JACK: Yeah.] but probably disabled that, too. It is hot, and again, it's been a long time since you really felt heat [JACK: Mmm.] of any real type. [JACK: Mmm.] And there's something different between this and the sun lamps you're able to use at home— at base. [JACK: Okay.] This is an arid heat, this is a dryness, because you're not in an enclosed environment. This is like— Your entire body begins to dehydrate, instantly. And the machine—

JACK: [crosstalk] I spilled the water.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] —does not do much better, right? But you have to continue.

[card thumps on table]

AUSTIN: Queen of Courage.

JACK: Oh, jeez! [Sighs] Okay. Well, I'll give you one of these.

[dice rattling]

AUSTIN: What's this for?

JACK: I'm about to disappoint you.

AUSTIN: If they can't do any of these things... If they can't play a card of the same suit, or a card of a higher value, if they can't even play a card— or if they can't— especially if they can't do both, the Pilgrim can turn to the Divine.

JACK: That's not what I'm doing.

AUSTIN: Oh. What are you doing?

JACK: I'm disappointing you.

AUSTIN: [serious] ...What are you doing?

JACK: I'm gonna play a Disappointment card.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, you're just playing a Disappointment card. Okay.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Phew!

JACK: I feel that I shouldn't turn to the divine if I'm going to disappoint you.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] That's fine. Well—

JACK: I don't think I know... [huffs]

AUSTIN: You don't know if you can turn to the Divine.

JACK: I don't— Well, also— No— [pfff] I don't feel that Chital...

AUSTIN: This is the moment in which the...

JACK: [crosstalk] Why is it in Chital's interest to go?

AUSTIN: [laughs]

JACK: Well, I mean, yeah, possibly, but I'm more interested in what happens if I disappoint them, provided the setting.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Ok, sounds good.

JACK: Also, these dice are amazing, Austin.

[dice rattling]

AUSTIN: They are pretty good.

JACK: The box does not do them justice. Here, have one of these Disappointment dice.

AUSTIN: Thank you.

JACK: I really like it when bowling balls look like this.

AUSTIN: Yeah, this is nice. It's a kind of red marbled— red and gold marbled Disappointment dice.

JACK: Yeah. Okay, so— I start singing. And I start singing a work song [**AUSTIN:** Hmmm.] because it's the only sort of song I know.

AUSTIN: What are the lyrics like?

JACK: I don't think it was written by Rigour. **[AUSTIN: Okay.]** So, I think it's a vaguely sarcastic voice. **[AUSTIN: Ah, okay.]** And it's about identifying and naming different types of tree **[AUSTIN: Hmm.]** and pointing them out as you do it. And so, as I move through the desert singing this song—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] About trees.

JACK: [crosstalk] And pointing them out—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] [singing] There is the birch...

JACK: [chuckles] [with the same melody] There is the cedar tree... There— You know, et cetera.

[AUSTIN: Yeah.] 100,000 years pass, and a two note interval in this song makes it into an Aria Joie track.

AUSTIN: [laughs] Yes, of course.

JACK: But I don't sing well. This doesn't work. **[AUSTIN: Yes. Right.]** It works, but it...

AUSTIN: So wait. Are you afraid?

JACK: Uh, yeah, totally! I'm going to burn to death! I'm playing a 10 of Hearts against Austin's Queen of Hearts.

AUSTIN: Alright. I'll take the Disappointment point.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: You... but you're able to do it, right? **[JACK: Yup.]** You don't do it with the grace and dignity— This is the thing with Disappointment isn't that you don't do it. It's that you— you— I wanna read the exact thing we've written here, because I think it's pretty good.

JACK: We are currently— So, we don't know what to call Disappointment, but we're getting there.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] There's something about personal— and the personal, emotional Disappointment that we like. **[JACK: Yeah...]** We don't like sin. We don't like heresy. We don't like... Those terms are all too...

JACK: We quite like waywardness, but that's not personal enough.

AUSTIN: Yeah, and it's too focused on the Pilgrim. **[JACK: Yeah.]** This is about the Divine having a feeling. It's the only time in the game that we say that the Divine must feel a certain way. **[JACK: Yes.]** So, if you play a card of the same suit with a lower value, this is Disappointment.

You've tried and failed to reach the heights of divine beauty and strength, and that is recognized [JACK: Hm.] in both a positive and negative way [JACK: Yeah.] right? You've tried [JACK: Mhm.] but here we are. [JACK: Yep.] But you make it, across the desert, singing your song about different trees.

JACK: Play *Firewatch*.

[card flips]

AUSTIN: Just flipped the relic over. It is an 8 of Spades.

JACK: That's quite a good relic.

AUSTIN: It's an alright relic. It's an 8 of Effort. Eventually, you see it in the distance. A tree, and then another, and then a few little bushes. And there, in the water itself, kneeling down, is a new chassis. It's smaller than the Juggernaut that you've been piloting, and it doesn't have anything on its arms or legs yet, but there it is. Gone are the cranelike arms of labor. And instead, there is something... It has arms like the songs you were singing. Articulate. Filled with possibility. You never know what it might be next. What do you do?

JACK: I think as I approach it, even before I get near it... And I think the system that allows it to do this is the same as the way we use nowadays to open automatic doors, I think it just—

AUSTIN: [as an automatic door would] Beep-beep.

JACK: There's a thing! There it is. A circle of lights, tiny lights, turns on, on what would be its wrist. It's a circle of green lights, and somewhere on that circle is a red light. And even though I haven't seen one of them in years, because I don't need them, I know immediately that it's a compass. And the cockpit opens, and one of the arms picks me up, and it puts me in, and then the cockpit closes. I see the Juggernaut burst into flame.

AUSTIN: Do you take the things that were on the Juggernaut away?

JACK: I can't. It's on fire. But the inside of this is cool.

AUSTIN: No, but I mean— the previous things.

JACK: [crosstalk] Ohhh. Well then, yeah. I guess I do.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Okay. You don't have to.

JACK: No, I do. I do...

AUSTIN: Why do you?

JACK: Why do I? Because I take— I take the... I think that I realize instantly that it has a similar system on it that lets me...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Mhm. So you don't need to take that. Yes.

JACK: [crosstalk] So I don't need to take that one, it's just inside the thing.

AUSTIN: But the saw blade.

JACK: I think that I take the saw blade in one hand, and I try and attach it to the other hand [AUSTIN chuckles] and I can't, because it's not a hand, right? It's like a claw [AUSTIN: Yeah, yeah.] or it's a... [AUSTIN: Yeah.] Oh! I know what it is. No, it's not a hand. It's just like a nubbin that [AUSTIN: Oh, okay.] has an electromagnet on it. [AUSTIN: Yes.] This is a hand, this is an electromagnet. So I can just—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Right hand was— He just gestured. Right hand is a hand. [both laugh] Left hand is an electromagnet.

JACK: Yeah, which I'm making as a fist [AUSTIN: Yes.] so you just hold it onto things and then pick them up. [AUSTIN: Okay.] And I— I mean I could, but it's not gonna... So I just, without thinking, I put it in a back—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] On the back.

JACK: —back thing. So now I just have this saw blade on my back. Does this thing have a name? I think if it has a name, you should be the one to name it, since you gave it to me.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Probably, probably. Yeah, it is...

JACK: Oh, also I think the effect it has on the environment is the Juggernaut catches fire. [AUSTIN: Okay.] Just because...

AUSTIN: I now get a thing also.

JACK: Oh, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Because it is up to three.

JACK: But name it first.

AUSTIN: I will. It is...

JACK: [sighs] I am Chital... Oh, I mean, is this just Liberty and Discovery?

AUSTIN: This is Liberty and Discovery.

JACK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: That is what this is.

JACK: Ok. How do we know that?

AUSTIN: Because it says so. When you go in, it doesn't just say that the navigation system is booting up. [**JACK:** Right.] It says like— The L and the D shows up, and it says, like, "Candidate: Chital." You know. [**JACK** laughs] "Liberty and Discovery: Activating." [laughs] "Air Conditioning: Activating."

JACK: Does it talk? Does it have a voice?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] "Navigation System—" It does. It's two voices, it's one over the other. It's like, [first voice] "Navi—" [second voice] "Navigation System: Activating." And sometimes they talk over each other, and sometimes it's one and then the other. [**JACK:** Yes.]

AUSTIN: Navigation system is Liberty— Or, sorry, navigation system is Discovery.

JACK: I guess the AC...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Motion is Liberty.

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah, or the AC as well.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Or the AC. I think both is the AC. [**JACK** laughs] They both care about you not overheating.

JACK: Okay, cool.

AUSTIN: So, when you get back— So this is— this is— Now the tower is at three [**JACK:** Hmm.] when you return, I get to... You explain how it affects the area, and then I get to follow up with a sentence.

JACK: Yes. The higher the tower gets [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] the more powerful the Divine becomes. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] Well, the more powerful, in theory, both of them become.

AUSTIN: Right, but the more— specifically the more narrative power the Divine [**JACK:** Yes.] player and the Divine itself gets in the world.

JACK: [crosstalk] Okay, so— Yeah. The— The— The...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] The Juggernaut catches fire.

JACK: [crosstalk] The Juggernaut explodes. To be clear, I don't think that's... That's not to do with Liberty and Discovery at all. That's just... The chassis was there, at just the right moment.

AUSTIN: Mhm. When you get back, you dock your new rigger. [**JACK** laughs] No one has any questions, but when you wake up the next morning, you see that three new people have joined your squadron.

JACK: Hm. Okay.

AUSTIN: Okay. Now, Judgment. Oh, now you write a new law.

JACK: Oh. Yes, I do. Uh. The new law that I'm writing is... [typing] Three. How do you feel about, "You have been given a compass. Use it."

AUSTIN: ...I like it.

JACK: Yeah? You frowned a little.

AUSTIN: Hm?

JACK: You frowned a little.

AUSTIN: I want it to be more like a law [**JACK:** Ok.] and less like a directive.

JACK: Ah. Right. Okay, yeah. Okay, so what about... uh. Liberty and Discovery is smaller than my previous...

AUSTIN: It is.

JACK: Oh. What about... What's the name of the logging company?

AUSTIN: [sighs] Hm. 10,000 years ago?

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Is it too... Oh, I think it's just like... Uh, it's Orion— It's the Orion Conservation [**JACK** laughs] Conglomerate.

JACK: Yeah. Yeah. And conservation...

AUSTIN: Oh, yeah.

JACK: Everybody— We already know— Everybody knows—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Everybody knows.

JACK: —the conservation there bit is stupid. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] Um, okay. Yeah. [typing] "I will never use Orion Conservation equipment again."

AUSTIN: Hm.

JACK: Hm.

AUSTIN: Interesting.

JACK: I heard a judgment.

AUSTIN: I am now going to look over these rules again. This time I'm not going to say them.

JACK: [laughs] Bad, given the fact I've forgotten them.

AUSTIN: Alright. I'm gonna give you two more Dogma. You're gonna now increase your Interpretation.

[tokens clatter]

JACK: Ooh, wow, I'm...

AUSTIN: Four. It's four. And you're gonna give me a Disappointment.

JACK: Okay. I now have enough Dogma... This is— Which one's which?

AUSTIN: Dogma is the brighter one.

JACK: Oh. I now have enough Dogma to do stuff with it.

AUSTIN: You do!

JACK: Here.

[tokens shaking]

AUSTIN: As you gain Dogma— As you gain these points, you can spend them to do special things. If Jack spends five Dogma, I have to discard a card from my hand that I then re— Or, that I have to reshuffle back into the deck. You can— I can choose as the Divine to show it to the Pilgrim or not. It's a blind— It's a blind pull. You effectively skip a challenge that way.

[card being placed]

AUSTIN: You play this— You can play this even on the last card of the pilgrimage. But you don't get to see what it is first. You have to do it while it's still in my hand.

JACK: Yes.

AUSTIN: Anyway—

["Aria Joie Sings The Blues" by Jack de Quidt plays]

AUSTIN: Where are you going?

[01:17:08] Day 21 Aboard the Kingdom Come

[music begins fading away]

AUSTIN: Day 21. AuDy refuses to leave the cockpit, and refuses to speak. Or... No one can tell if it's refusal or not, but it is silence. And no attempt to prod them into awareness, either mechanical or virtual, has any effect. But there have been group dinners, and there has been chatter, and maybe a little hope. What is Mako doing, as the Kingdom Come floats through empty space?

KEITH: Um... So, you know, ships are fast, Austin.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

KEITH: But like, space is also really big.

AUSTIN: It's huge.

KEITH: And I remember, like, really— for the first time I ever had to think about that was when I was playing KOTOR 2 [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] and the Handmaiden is like, “Man, I forgot how fucking boring interstellar travel is.” [**AUSTIN** laughs] And when you— When— In a Star Wars movie, and you see the stars zoom past you, it feels like, well, no matter what, you're there in an instant. [**AUSTIN:** Right.] But I think that... I think that Mako gets really bored and fidgety.

AUSTIN: Yeah, I definitely think that.

KEITH: And seems like some— and especially stressed out because of this whole Larry thing, and like [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] I've got a me in my mind, but it's a program, and [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] is that— What's going on here, and just like, grumpily sort of shuffling around, finding anything to do, crumpling up stuff and throw— bouncing it off the wall a lot.

AUSTIN: It's just like, the shot of the crunched up paper balls, slowly filling up the trash can.

KEITH: Yeah, piling up.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I love that.

KEITH: I think that's mostly— and trying not to have to do any actual stuff.

AUSTIN: I suspect... I feel like maybe it's a situation of just, like— Orth as co-pilot at this point, and co-pilot who doesn't have to do anything, and AuDy's just in this weird trance, just assigns people bullshit tasks to do every week [**KEITH:** Hmm.] that are just completely empty, and there's no actual threat behind not doing them. But, like—

KEITH: [crosstalk] Right. It's just filler.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Just like, “Can someone please—”

KEITH: Like, here's the episode where Mako has to scrub some— scrub down the hallways?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Right, exactly. For some reason? And it doesn't matter. It's not— They're not that dirty to begin with? I like that a lot. So the other thing that I'm thinking a lot— I've been thinking a lot about with Mako, is... So, the last episode included Mako hacking his own mind, right? **[KEITH: Yeah.]** And I really like that as a sort of narrative device, that that's a thing he can do now, as a sort of, like, way to reflect on—

KEITH: [crosstalk] Yeah, like an introspection...

AUSTIN: Yeah, but in an almost disembodied sense. And I know one of the things you as a player have been interested in, and certainly I have too, as a GM, is, like... What was Mako's time at the September Institute like, and more importantly, the thing that I'm always curious about, is what were his last days there like? **[KEITH: Mhm.]**

Um, so I was thinking of maybe just framing a scene that was just Mako... you know, maybe, playing around with this new ability he has of [laughs] hacking his own brain **[KEITH: Okay.]** to watch young Mako, or younger Mako **[KEITH: Mhm.]** in those final days of the September Institute. Especially since we've just never seen it yet, and there's a chance we'll see it in the future, so I'm kinda curious what those days looked like. What was it that convinced Mako that he wanted to leave?

KEITH: I think that definitely... I wanna just say Mako's obnoxiousness was maybe born out of, like... maybe years of being at the September institute and not being someone that is paid attention to at all? **[AUSTIN: Mmm.]** Not specifically that he was ignored, but just that it never even occurred to him to make trouble.

AUSTIN: Right. So do we just get straight laced Mako?

KEITH: Yeah, I think for— **[AUSTIN crosstalks filler words]** Definitely not the last days, but I think maybe we just—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Sure, but we just get images of Mako throughout his time at the September Institute, kind of like— Not just flashback style, but almost like turning through pages in someone's life really quickly, you know? Like a flip book of his life. **[KEITH: Yeah, yeah.]** And we get— You know, young teen Mako with the nice haircut... **[KEITH: Mhm.]** And then, is that just, like— By the end is he starting to be the goof that we now know and love?

KEITH: Yeah. And I think it's definitely, like... Maybe he's goofing, but I think a lot of it is resentment of the place— **[AUSTIN: Hmm.]** I bet Mako's had to hear a lot of explanations about why people aren't around anymore. **[AUSTIN: Right. Right.]** Like, why... Like, "Hey, where's my friend," and he's like, "Oh, visiting family."

AUSTIN: Right. Is that a thing that you think that happens a lot at the September Institute?

KEITH: I mean, more than a school I've ever been to.

AUSTIN: Right, more than a school that we go to now, where [laughs] someone, at least if they move, they at least tell you ahead of time. Like, “Oh, hey—”

KEITH: [crosstalk] “Hey, I’m moving.”

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] “I’m moving to Alabama,” or whatever.

KEITH: If I disappear ever, don’t even worry— Don’t worry.

AUSTIN: Don’t worry about it—

KEITH: [crosstalk] No one’s after me...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] —my dad’s in the military. Right.

KEITH: It’s not like 2016, where a lot of people will say, “Don’t worry, no one’s after me.”

AUSTIN: Right, which is a common phrase.

KEITH: [laughs] Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, god. Yeah, I like that a lot. Is that— Was there— Is it just a slow building resentment that causes Mako to want to leave, or is there a single catalytic event?

KEITH: Um... Yes, definitely catalytic event. I’m gonna go... Maybe, let’s see. I definitely think Mako being sort of a late-blooming rebel [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] was a slow build, but the decision to leave was definitely from like, “This is the last thing I can see without, like [**AUSTIN:** Right.] believing what I’m being told.”

AUSTIN: Okay. Um, you know— How about this. How about you give me a Research check, and feel free to use your special research ability with that too—

KEITH: [crosstalk] Cool, great, yes.

AUSTIN: —which just gives you a +1 Ongoing to Research?

KEITH: It does give me +1 Ongoing, if I succeed.

AUSTIN: Right. So plus one’s a 10.

KEITH: Great, awesome.

AUSTIN: So, “When you investigate a person, place, or object, or service, using a library, dossier, or database—” I kinda like this as an image of Mako testing the limits of— This is this amazing— Oh, you know what I actually really like? How about this? [**KEITH:** Okay.] How about... This is some real sci-fi bullshit. What if it’s Mako, watching young Mako— So you’ve hacked into your own brain, right?

KEITH: Okay. And I'm watching, like, a video?

AUSTIN: Or no, I think it's like a 3D— It's like a holo—

KEITH: So it's the same as— It's like the memory thing that we were in?

AUSTIN: Yes, it's just like that, except— **[KEITH: Okay.]** In fact, maybe this is the way you do that, technically you're in your Larry form, moving around Mako's memories, you know? **[KEITH: Right.]** I think Larry form just has his hair parted the other way. **[KEITH laughs]** That's how very close—

KEITH: **[crosstalk]** In a very— Whatever color Mako's hair and shirt are **[AUSTIN: Yes.]** they match, but for Larry, they match in a slightly different way.

AUSTIN: **[crosstalk]** Exactly. Yeah. Totally.

KEITH: Like, one's a little darker, one's a little lighter.

AUSTIN: Yes, exactly. I think people who'd— who... Super fans of the show would notice this, and most people wouldn't. And I kinda like this notion of, like— Young Mako found something out, that was just like, "None of this adds up, I'm getting the fuck out of here," but because of the way being a Stratus works, your brain still literally has that database in it, and so now older Mako can hack into that same database. **[KEITH: Okay.]**

And I'm not saying this is a thing that we can always do going forward. This isn't a new move for you **[KEITH: Right.]** but this is a moment of intense emotional strain, and like— So for whatever reason, you kind of, in a fit— in the fit of— **[KEITH: Mhm.]** with all of your power, you downloaded a bunch of stuff.

KEITH: **[crosstalk]** This is a mom lifting a car. She can't do that every day.

AUSTIN: **[crosstalk]** Yes. Exactly, exactly. But I really like this notion of older Mako hacking your own brain, to then hack a system that you actually did already hack, you know, four years ago, or whatever. So, your research questions. First of all, you take intel going forward **[KEITH: Okay.]** against the September Institute, so take that point and just hold onto it until the next session.

KEITH: Alright, I'm gonna write that down because I will forget.

AUSTIN: I will also, because it'll be a little while until we record again.

KEITH: **[reading]** Holds and Forwards...

AUSTIN: Intel with regards to the September Institute.

KEITH: "Intel Sept Inst." Done.

AUSTIN: Nice. And so now, you can also ask me a follow up question from this list. In fact, I thought that you got— Is it just one question? I think it is. Where would I 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: [Groans] Uh.

AUSTIN: Oh, right, sorry. So I'll answer you this question [**KEITH:** Mhm.] and also a follow up question from the list, so you get two questions.

KEITH: Okay, great.

AUSTIN: The list is— If you need it, it's under...

KEITH: Yeah, no— I'm looking at it now, this is tough.

AUSTIN: It is.

KEITH: I would like to know all of the— the answer to all of these questions. [**AUSTIN:** Sure, sure.] Um... Okay. Who or what am I most valuable to?

AUSTIN: Huh. That's a really good question. Okay... So I think, again, the visual for this is, like, young Mako is hacking, and then freezes with, like, VCR-style— not just static, but the tracking is off a little bit [**KEITH:** Yeah.] and now, you're now stepping past yourself to do another hack layer [**KEITH:** Okay.] and I almost like as if the material that's on-screen is still there, ghosting, behind the new material that's coming up around it [**KEITH:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.] you know what I mean?

Here's a question. Would this be— This is a more narrative answer. Is this an answer about young Mako or about adult Mako?

KEITH: Um.

AUSTIN: My gut says young Mako, because that's the system you're hacking.

KEITH: Yeah, I would say young Mako— I think that the— that Mako—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] The answer may not be that different.

KEITH: The answer may be the same either way, I think that Mako would— is trying to figure out something about— that's useful now, but...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Sure, that's actually true. Yeah, that makes sense, because that is— You're talking about yourself. [**KEITH:** Yeah.] Yeah, totally. Alright, so, I think your research reveals... that... I'm trying to do my best to think about how this would be presented to you naturally.

[pause]

AUSTIN: You are most– Okay, here’s what you get, too, is– You find a deep– a document that’s deep in the servers, that is communication between... just, like, “12” and “I”, and I think you’re probably smart enough to put together that that’s Twelfth, who is the kind of headmaster at the school– the Superintendent, whatever– and, probably–

KEITH: [crosstalk] Superintendent Twelfth?

AUSTIN: Yeah, that’s the head of the September Institute. [**KEITH:** Okay.] Not the original head of the September Institute [**KEITH:** No, the–] the head as of your time there, basically [**KEITH:** Mhm.] Because it started a long time ago.

KEITH: [crosstalk] How many headmasters have there been?

AUSTIN: I think two. [**KEITH:** Two.] The previous one was Maryland September, who the school is named after. [**KEITH:** Okay.] She is not around anymore.

KEITH: There haven’t– So you’re saying there haven’t been [**AUSTIN:** No.] at least 12.

AUSTIN: No, there have not been at least 12. This guy’s name is just Twelfth. That’s just his– That’s just– Welcome to the Golden Branch star sector [**KEITH** laughs] where people have names like Headmaster Twelfth.

KEITH: [laughs] I think Territory Jazz is [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] still my favorite.

AUSTIN: Still the best. So you’re probably able to put together or guess that that’s Twelfth talking to Ibex [**KEITH:** Okay.] based on stuff that you learned in the last session. And, it is talking about the new... um, the new... like, what’s the– the new class of trainees, and Twelfth is pushing really hard towards–

This is dated from back when Mako was at the September Institute, probably when he was even younger in the September Institute, when he was still the straight-laced boy, before he’s kind of become rebellious, and it’s Twelfth kind of pushing towards this notion of, “We should activate these students the second they’re ready,” and that they are an important– an important weapon against tyranny, and how, you know, they are–

No one will expect that they’ll be used as agents of the Diaspora instead of agents against the Diaspora, let alone agents of the Diaspora against other elements inside of the Diaspora.

[**KEITH:** Right.] So I think that’s the– you’re most valuable to someone who wants to hurt the Diaspora. [**KEITH:** Okay.] And that’s kind of obvious in some senses, but the kind of surprising information is that that might be not just OriCon. Not just Apostolos.

KEITH: Right, but something we don’t know, or something that’s also, ostensibly, a Diasporan thing.

AUSTIN: Right, right. Exactly. So you get another follow up. I should note, that in that conversation, the “I” is— the person with just, like, the “I” at the front of their sentences is pushing back on that pretty heavily— is like, “It’s not time for that. That’s a last— That’s a last...” What’s the word I’m looking for? “--a last resort. That’s... We have to see how things develop. We’re still too close to the peace.” Things like that. Very cautious and not—

KEITH: [crosstalk] You said that he was talking to Ibex?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Well, you’re— I’m saying that’s probably the case. I don’t think it just said, “Oh, this is Ibex, right here,” [KEITH: Right.] but I think Mako is smart enough to put that together. [KEITH: Okay.] Maybe enough so that in the filming of this show, we would see those characters extrapolated, do you know what I mean?

KEITH: Mhm. Or you see a tell-tale piece of his clothing.

AUSTIN: Right, exactly. Exactly.

KEITH: Oooh. Eagle-eyed observers will note.

AUSTIN: Yes. Alright, so, follow up.

KEITH: Follow up. Um... That’s tough. Follow up is even tougher.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It is. It is. Again, those are, for the listeners, “Where would I find blank? How secure is blank? Who or what is related to blank?”

KEITH: [crosstalk] Oh, I’m still using the template? Okay. Okay.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yes. Yes, yes, yes. “Who or what is owned or employed by blank?”

KEITH: Who owned or employed Ibex?

AUSTIN: Oh, that’s a tough question. Like...

KEITH: Or it’s a frustrating simple one. The Diaspora did.

AUSTIN: No, it’s not that simple, because, like, the Diaspora is very much as— Right, the People Of The Diaspora do. So I think... without— Oh, boy. So I think you find— you find communication between...

What you find is a video that Maryland September recorded with her and Ibex. They’re meeting in her office before there was a September Institute. She’s young. She has kinda red-orange hair. It’s worn up. She has a kind of collared suit on, I think it’s probably green? She has a... I think her— kind of, pale face with the sort of wrinkles of just, like, normal living, right?

Whereas Ibex— Obviously Ibex is much younger here [**KEITH**: Mhm.] but is also... also even now that he's older, is put together in such a way that clearly he is pursuing solutions to keep him looking as young and handsome as he will always be. [**KEITH**: Okay.] I don't think those solutions are unavailable to Maryland, just so much as she's super busy, and isn't going to get her wrinkles smoothed out, or whatever, right? [**KEITH**: Right, yeah.]

And that conversation is... tense, in the way that people with history have tense conversations. [**KEITH**: Mhm.] I think you probably get the impression they're exes. [**KEITH**: Okay.] There's definitely lots of... inside looks, if not inside jokes.

KEITH: Yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: Um... and—

KEITH: [crosstalk] Can I use your robot to infect these people and use them as agents against...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Right, right, that's what that says.

KEITH: [crosstalk] That's sort of the thing that you do with a lover.

AUSTIN: Right, totally. The conversation is actually kinda way different than that. It's him being impr— It's her being super excited about her research [**KEITH**: Mhm.] and him being genuinely impressed by it. [**KEITH**: Okay.]

Her research is looking at people like Jace Rethal, and a handful of other names that you don't recognize, as being potential Strati, right? This new term that she's— that she has... I think she probably said something offhand once that stuck. You know what I mean? One of those things— [**KEITH**: Mhm.] The newspaper started reporting and calling these people "Stratus". You know, calling them— calling Jace "A Stratus", and she's like—

(as Maryland): That's not really what I— [scoffs] I meant that he's at a different stratus level of... Okay, he's a Stratus. [**KEITH** laughs] We're gonna call these people Strati now.

AUSTIN: Um, and...

KEITH: That's probably how that hoverboard got its name.

AUSTIN: Totally. [laughs]

KEITH: Like—

(as Maryland): "Guys, that's not a hoverboard. That's not what we meant."

AUSTIN (as Maryland): "That's not what we meant. That's not... Ugh. Okay, fine. It's a hover— Okay, it's a hoverboard now."

AUSTIN: So I think that there's definitely this back and forth where she's explaining that there's this new level of human consciousness that's available... or that's appearing naturally in some people, where they are extra empathetic, or they have access to— to... not non-physical things, but to virtual assets the way that most people only have access to physical assets.

That there's this thing emerging, and that her research has shown that there might be a way to initiate that, with someone— with people who aren't born that way. And that it's imperative that she figure out how to do that, because if she doesn't, people like Jace— or people who are going to use Jace— will position themselves as people of power. So that it's a matter of giving people access to that toolset, so that it isn't just random genetic luck who gets to be better than other people.

And at the end of that conversation, she puts a hand on his hand, and says, "We've been through a lot, but I think you could help me with this." And there is something like reservation in his eyes for half a second, and then we get, *Blade Runner* style, the yellow glare on his eyes [**KEITH:** Mhm.] and then he sighs and says—

(as Ibex): "Okay. Okay. I can help. I can help with that."

AUSTIN: So I think what you get there is... He's owned by the people of the Diaspora, and his concern is— His concern is the well-being of the people of the Golden Branch star sector, but he also has this loyalty to whatever the September Institute— whatever promises he's made to Maryland September [**KEITH:** Okay.] about what the September Institute is.

KEITH: Okay.

AUSTIN: So I think that's what you get. And then it boots you back out, and for half a second... I guess this is the way that this shows itself, right? Is— It goes live again, and the Ibex personification in your head looks at you for a second, and blinks, and then you come out of the entire fugue.

KEITH: God, that guy's everywhere.

AUSTIN: Sort of, sort of. It's complicated.

KEITH: It's complicated, but [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] he keeps seeing me places! I don't like it!

AUSTIN: You're definitely being seen. It's interesting. Is there anything else Mako does, or do you think it's just this kind of combination of weird introspection, plus not wanting to scrub the floors, plus playing— building card towers?

KEITH: I think... I think he spent a lot of time being mad that they even expect him to scrub the floors. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] They don't pay me! [**AUSTIN** laughs] No one— I've been— I've been with this group for a while— Barely anybody pays me!

AUSTIN: To be fair, barely anyone gets paid, so...

KEITH: Right, but I'm definitely barely getting paid to scr- [**AUSTIN:** Sure.] I'm definitely not barely getting paid to scrub the floors.

AUSTIN: Yeah, I kinda like that as the way we go out on this, as like... Mako comes out of this fugue and then, like, there's a knock at his door, and it's just Orth going, like, "These floors still need scrubbed!" And Mako just... Yeah.

KEITH: Throws his paper ball at a basket even harder.

[MUSIC: "All Of The Different Trees That There Are" by Jack de Quidt plays]

AUSTIN: Yeah. Makes the whole thing tips over, and they fall out.

KEITH: Mhm.

[01:38:53] The Pilgrimage of Righteousness

[music begins fading away]

JACK: I have a little more control now.

AUSTIN: You do, now that we're at the third floor of the tower, you can choose a little bit more. So now you can say, "I go north, to the nearby village." Well... You know what, I guess it's not true- I think that's not true. [**JACK** laughs] Sorry. These rules are tough. Cause like, at the start, it's, "I head north. I leave the ship." Then it's, "I go north, taking the subway." Eventually it will be, "I go north, taking the subway, to the nearby village," and then at the highest level, it's, "I go north, taking the subway, to the nearby village, and visit the blacksmith shop." That's our example.

JACK: [chuckles] The blacksmith who makes the subway.

AUSTIN: Yeah, who makes the subway.

JACK: Uhhh... Okay. So I do have- I have more control here basically.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yes, you do.

JACK: Ok, so, I am going to... I'm going to go back the way I came.

AUSTIN: Hm.

JACK: Back across the desert.

AUSTIN: Okay. Okay, I'm gonna draw my cards. I've already put the next relic down. Hm...

JACK: Oh! No! I need to tithe.

AUSTIN: You do need to tithe. You should tithe now.

JACK: Ok, so, uh, I'm going to...

AUSTIN: So you have a 2 of Diamonds, a 4 of Clubs, and an 8 of Cour– or, 8 of Hearts, 8 of Courage. Or 8 of Spades, sorry.

JACK: Yeah. Uh, so I'm going to– I have a really bad hand for this. Uh, I'm going to... Oh! I'm going to... I'm going to pretend to be sick. To be ill. So that I can't work. [**AUSTIN** chuckles] And in order to be... ill, you need to be... checked by seven independent doctors. [Austin laughs]

AUSTIN: Rigour is very, uh, rigorous in their testing.

JACK: [crosstalk] Incredibly rigorous. Well, he... Rigour wants you to be wo– You can have a broken leg and Rigour wants you to be working [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] but if you get through all seven... And I'm doing this through a combination–

AUSTIN: The reason he does this– The reason that Rigour does this is that, if– by the time you'd see the eighth doctor, it'd be too late in the day to get any productivity out of you anyway.

JACK: [laughs] Right.

AUSTIN: Just go home.

JACK: Yeah. Yeah, but the reason I'm– the way I'm doing this is through a combination of good acting and bribery. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] I'm also going– So I've, uh, this... Uh, I'll just keep them by the– [**AUSTIN:** That's fine.] –while I'm doing it. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Uh... I'm going to expend... Uh... That night, I drink five pints [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] in the bar.

AUSTIN: Seven pints.

JACK: I drink five pints. [**AUSTIN:** Oh.] And I get in a bar fight [**AUSTIN** chuckles] and I get hit twice.

AUSTIN: [Laughs] That's a 7 of, uh... Clubs.

JACK: [crosstalk] Clubs. And, uh, finally, I... Um... Oh, I know what I do. The base is– is... 10 stories: One story is kitchens [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] nine stories are rigger storage. You sleep in your riggers. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] I'm gonna climb to the tenth floor, and I'm gonna turn on my mapping unit. And I see [awestruck] a tremendous distance. Just a gigantic distance. And I turn it off again. And I'm all paid up. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.]

[cards shuffling]

JACK: Are there instances where you can't pay a tithe?

AUSTIN: Oh, yeah.

JACK: Oh, yeah? [obviously] Oh, yeah. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: And then you have to deactivate relics.

JACK: Yea, you shut down relics.

AUSTIN: We're getting there, actually. [**JACK** chuckles] Wait, why do you still have... Yeah, that's correct.

JACK: Oh, wow. Yeah, come at me Austin!

AUSTIN: Yeah. Okay.

[cards shuffling]

JACK: Oh, well, let's say that one.

AUSTIN: Okay.

JACK: Right. Now, Judgment.

AUSTIN: No, we already did Judgment. Now's a new trial, [**JACK:** Okay.] a new pilgrimage. Relic is on the ground— on the table. You're going back into the desert?

JACK: [In sing song] Mhm.

AUSTIN: This is the Pilgrimage of Righteousness.

JACK: Huh... I have no idea what that name means, but Liberty and Discovery does. If we're— Yeah.

AUSTIN: No.

JACK: [in realization] No. Divines don't know about Divines that don't exist yet, I guess.

AUSTIN: They're on you this time. Your boss looked into it. There is no "Chital". And that new rigger you have? That's not up to standards. You're not allowed to have personal riggers. It's against the code. But you have a head start. Yours is a little faster, and if you keep up your speed, you'll outrun them.

[card thumps on table]

AUSTIN: 7 of Effort.

JACK: How armored am I?

AUSTIN: Fairly. Um, so I think this is... This Divine is about the size that Disinterest was, which is to say, uh...

JACK: Uh, Detachment?

AUSTIN: Detachment. Sorry, not Disinterest– Detachment. [**AUSTIN** chuckles] It's a different one. Critical Disinterest. Um– [**JACK** laughs] Detachment. Uh, which is to say– Bigger than a Rook, much smaller than a Grace [**JACK** laughs] smaller than most of Snowtrak's stuff, except for the tiny Snowtrak stuff. So I think this is–

JACK: [crosstalk] Bigger than Sokrates.

AUSTIN: Bigger than Sokrates, but Sokrates is the size of a man. [**JACK:** Yeah.] Uh, and then... You know, 12-13 feet high? [**JACK:** Ok.] Smaller than– than the Juggernaut, by quite a bit.

JACK: And smaller than the Brilliance?

AUSTIN: Bigger than the Brilliance.

JACK: [crosstalk] Bigger than the Brilliance–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Or, the size of the Brilliance, give or take. [**JACK:** Yeah. Okay.] Maybe a little bit... No, smaller than the Brilliance is right.

JACK: Smaller than the Megalophile–

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Smaller than the Brilliance. Much smaller than Megalophile. [**JACK** sighs] It's more than an exosuit, but not by much. [**JACK:** Right, okay.] You control it with buttons and sticks, not by moving your body. [**JACK:** Hm.] Sometimes it's as if it moves a little bit too quickly though. You– “I need to turn le–” And then you turned left.

JACK: Yeah. Yeah. It's like a HOTAS [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] thing. Right, okay. So I think that... Hm. You're gonna have to tell me how you feel about this one [**AUSTIN:** Sure.] whether or not there's a... We have a great rule for disputes [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] which is that you can argue about them, but the Divine will always win.

AUSTIN: Yeah. The Divine will negotiate perfectly fine. [**JACK:** Yeah.] But–

JACK: –but they're always gonna...

AUSTIN: There's a point which the Divine can say, “Nah, I just don't– [short sigh] This just doesn't work for me,” and if the Pilgrim can't have faith in their Divine at that point, then the quest is over, and they don't get whatever the– You flip the relic over, you describe what it would have been, and how it is ruined, and they don't get it.

JACK: Do we know what happens when you leave the quadrant you've been assigned to? Does the rigger just not work?

AUSTIN: Traditionally, that's... Traditionally, you literally can't leave the quadrant. Remember?

JACK: No, this is what I'm saying— for other people. What happens if you try?

AUSTIN: You can't. It doesn't walk past the line. [**JACK:** Okay.] Like it takes that step and it's the last step it takes. It stops right there and it can step backwards, but it can't step forward. It's like an invisible wall in a video game. [**JACK:** Hmmm...] You literally run up against it.

JACK: Yeah... I can— I have this Ace of Clubs [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] and I'm kind of... What's this doing here? Oh, this is—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, this is the challenge. [both laugh] That's the 7 of Spades.

JACK: I'm kind of... I wonder whether I could incite some sort of... If I shut down a system, would people— Nobody has any investment to come to my aid, whatsoever?

AUSTIN: Maybe.

JACK: I can't offer a rousing speech... for Liberty... [invigorated] Actually, no, to be honest... I want to try and shut down the thing that means you can't... [**AUSTIN:** Sure.] with the intention... It's like— It's like the prison escapee hammering the [**AUSTIN:** Yes, yes.] "open all the cell door" buttons, but I don't know how to do that. Is that just a thing on my dashboard now?

AUSTIN: Were you in your rigger when you were on the tenth floor? Or did you—

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Hm, okay.

JACK: Yeah, we climbed up. Maybe it's a big lift.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Maybe you accessed then, and you set up, like, a kill switch.

JACK: Yeah. Was that what I was planning to do, or did I just find that I can do that while I was up there.

AUSTIN: You found that you could do it while you were up there. You went up there for the view, and to see how far you can see.

JACK: Yeah... Yeah. And I- I'm gonna cede narrative power to you here, in terms of what actually happens [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] but I'm putting down Clubs, and I don't know if that's an act of violence...

AUSTIN: It becomes one.

JACK: I think it beco— I think, shutting the things down is an act— Or, and this is, this might be—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You're not shutting anything down.

JACK: I mean, do I just do this.

[card thumps on table]

AUSTIN: What is that?

JACK: That's Wits.

AUSTIN: Yeah, that's Wits. [**JACK:** Yeah.] What are you doing— What you were talking about now was Wits.

JACK: Yeah. Yeah, yeah yeah.

AUSTIN: Yes.

JACK: I'm shutting these things down. Yeah, I feel better.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] So you shut down the systems that keeps— that Rigour uses to keep them from moving [**JACK:** Mhm.] and there are five behind you. Two of them sprint up to you and, like, take your flank. And they have no lock on you. They are with you now. [**JACK** laughs] Two of them stop in their tracks, and the last one runs off into the woods, leaving the path that Rigour set for it.

JACK: [chuckles] How are they notified that they could now move freely?

AUSTIN: I think they just get... they— On their side, that system— the map just opens, right? [**JACK** laughs] Like, it's a strict line, and— or, it's a strict, like... Two vertical lines show the path they're allowed to walk on [**JACK:** Yes.] and it just opens up into [**JACK:** Yeah.] a sphere [**JACK:** Yeah.] covering the entire globe. [**JACK:** Great, cool.] Okay.

[card placed on table]

AUSTIN: You reach the Oasis again. [**JACK:** Oh.] And, while your machine is still working well, those of the two people who are with you, a man and a woman, are doing less well. One of them is overheating, steaming, and the other's... The magnetosphere down here has totally wrecked its ability to use its left leg, and it's been dragging it for the last mile.

[card placed on table]

AUSTIN: 9 of Wits. They're friendly people, and they're thrilled that they've taken— that— that you've let them come with you. It's Vanessa and Vanell. They're cousins who came here to work off a family debt.

JACK: [sighs deeply] Ok, I'm going to... deploy the saw blade from my back, and take off the— Well, I don't even need to do that actually... Ok, I'm going to ask that one of them... enters the cockpit of the other mech. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] It's not gonna be comfortable [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] but it's gonna be cramped. And then I'm going to deploy the saw blade, which is going to— It's not gonna do much, but it's going to act as a mobile [**AUSTIN** chuckles] source of shadow [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] over the component which I saw start [**AUSTIN** laughs] the small fire on me.

AUSTIN: You're, like, fanning it, almost.

JACK: Or— or is it just— is it just like a— like a—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, just, like, hovering?

JACK: [crosstalk] —parasol.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] It's like a parasol. That's really great.

JACK: [crosstalk] It's moving behind them.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] That's really good. I like it.

JACK: Ummmm. So that's a Queen of Witssss.

AUSTIN: Okay. [pause] You keep walking in that direction now, and in the distance, the—

[cat meows]

AUSTIN: There's a cat meowing. [**JACK** chuckles] No, that's not— In the distance, you hear the other rigger explode. [**JACK** laughs]

[cat meows again]

AUSTIN: That is what the rigger exploding sounds like. [**JACK** laughs] In the distance you hear the sound of the other rigger— Vanell's— exploding. This isn't the explosion of an overheating rigger. You've heard what that sounds like. This is the sound of...

This is the sound of a rigger being dispatched. [**JACK:** Hmm.] And before you know it, that one that went missing is on you again, and not from the direction you expect. It comes at you through the dunes, and it seems that it's used what you've given it so that it may better serve Rigour. Like a good worker, it knows how to take that freedom and turn it into productivity. 7 of Clubs.

JACK: Hmm. Ace of Clubs. I don't know whether or not it's a decision I make, or it's something that Liberty and Discovery...

AUSTIN: This is the decision you make. You played the card.

JACK: Oh, okay. Ohh, yeah. Good call. The saw blade leaves Vanessa and Vanell, and— I don't know how— I don't know whether or not, in that moment, they're— something bad happens to their mech, but instead what it does is it goes singing off across the sand dunes towards the approaching rigger, and...

This has happened to me twice. I've seen this happen twice now, and rather than going for its cutting arms, or its laser, it embeds itself in the scant air circulation system on the back, and shreds it. And before it begins to move towards me again, it hits the only lock on the cockpit, which opens.

AUSTIN: [exhales] Phew. That's a rough death.

JACK: Oh, they'll be fine. They're near an oasis.

AUSTIN: [judgemental] Hm. Okay. You come to another mountain, and when you step into its shadow, it is comforting and welcoming, and you see carved into its wall a similar crack, as you saw before, so you slash at it and it opens. And then you see a door. Metal. Strong. Locked. And above it, a camera, which [imitates aperture opening and closing] zooms in on you, and beeps. Beeps. Beeps. 10 of Diamonds. 10 of Wits.

[card smacks on table]

AUSTIN: There it is.

JACK: [read 'em and weep] King of Diamonds. I get out of the mech, and unlike the— unlike the lumber— the Juggernaut riggers, which immediately kneel down and shut off [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] the mech stands— continues to stand upright. You know, servos still move in its arms and legs to keep itself balanced, and I beckon for Vanessa and Vanell to— Are they okay? I mean, I gave them the—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I think Vanell is— is—

JACK: I took the thing away from them.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: Heatstroke?

AUSTIN: Vanell is passed out. [**JACK:** Okay.] Vanessa is at the pilot seat, and trying [**JACK:** Right.] her best to stay— Once she got into the shade, she was better.

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's prob— It's cool in here. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Yeah. So, I beckon for them to get out, and I guess Vanessa carries [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Vanell. We all stand up in front of the camera, and I say, "My name is Jim-7, they call me Jim-7, but I got by Chital now. We have come here to find new things." Yeah, and I— and— and then— [chuckles] and then I think as though— as though we are very confident, we just climb back into the mechs again and wait. [exhales] [cards flicking] Hm.

AUSTIN: 3 of Wits is the relic.

JACK: Ooh. Oh, nope. It's gone.

AUSTIN: These are mine. You can take that. Well— Yeah, you can take it. It is— So, the doors open, with a clank, and you step inside in your mechs, and it's another hangar like the one you saw before, except this one only has two machines in it. And the cameras follow you as you walk through the facility. And deep in its trenches, there is an old woman [**JACK:** Hm.] in a room similar to the one where you first saw the LD logo in the previous base, and she breathes deep, and says—

(as old woman): It is too much for me now. I've held it back as long as I can, but there is too much wrong. Please take it.

AUSTIN: And she hands you a small disk. And on it, it says "Righteousness.dat." What do you do with it?

JACK: Does Liberty and Discovery have a CD drive?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: [sucks teeth] Um. I think... that I have recognized— I think... Nowadays, we know how Divines are named. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] And we know— I guess, more specifically, we know that they are defined off things. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.]

And I don't think I know that [**AUSTIN:** No.] but I do— I have now seen three. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] I've seen Liberty and Discovery [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] I've seen Rigour [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] even though I don't know that he's a Divine, and now I've seen Righteousness. So my assumption is that these— this is a similar thing. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] So I'm gonna put it in.

AUSTIN: Okay. It beeps up and everything— Oh, so— so, actually— Tell me how the area changes when you do this.

JACK: I think that we get back in—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, no, sorry. We're at four.

JACK: Oh, ho-ho-ho!

AUSTIN: This switches now. So, at three— So, at zero cards through three, you explain how it affects the area. [**JACK:** Yeah.] At three, you explain how it affects the area, and then I follow it up with a sentence. [**JACK:** [scared] Mhm.] Now, I def— I say how it affects the area, and you follow up with a sentence. [**JACK:** Yes.] Um.

Your machine works so much better now. [**JACK** laughs] And so do those of Vanessa and Vanell, that— They took the two that were left here, and followed you back. When you get back, just— All the way out in the— When you— On your way back, you see a new icon on your map, and it leads you to that first base that you were at. And outside there are tents, and fires, and people are singing a song [**JACK:** Hm.] about all the different sorts of trees there are. And they're singing it really well. You get a sentence.

JACK: As we climbed back into our mechs to place the disk into the disk drive, with the attitude of somebody about to miss a train waiting on the platform, the old woman stood up and walked towards us with her arm outstretched, and then realized that the moment had passed and it had gone, and sat down again.

AUSTIN: Alright. Judgment. No, Law. You make a law.

JACK: Um... I want something— I want one of those real basic Old Testament laws about the people in the tents. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] Basically, like— [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] Like— Oh, my god— The one where it's basically like [voice of God] "This." "Nurture" is the wrong word. "Nurture this?" Would Liberty and Discovery say "nur—" I know they're not saying it, but I'm trying [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] to act in their image. Would they say "nurture"? More importantly, I guess, would Chital say "nurture"? [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] It's not nurturing, it's— it's—

AUSTIN: What's the word that someone who has worked under Rigour would say, instead of nurture?

JACK: Oh, I know what it is, because the OriCon Conservation— Sorry, the— [laughs] [**AUSTIN** chuckles] The Orion Conservation... Conglomerate?

AUSTIN: Conglomerate, still. Yeah.

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah. OriCon-Con. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] Uhh... It's in their manuals. [**AUSTIN:** It is.] And the word is "cultivate".

AUSTIN: Mmm. "Cultivate this." Cultivate...?

JACK: Cultivate saplings. Cultivate... [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] [eureka] That's what it is! "Cultivate these saplings."

AUSTIN: I think, just "saplings".

JACK: It just—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Or, you mean it's more about this.

JACK: [crosstalk] [incredulous] The law is just "saplings"?

AUSTIN: "Cultivate saplings."

JACK: Oh—

AUSTIN: Or is it these?

JACK: No, yeah. It's, "Cultivate saplings."

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Is it these, or is it in general?

JACK: [crosstalk] No, I've been chopping— I've been chopping trees down my whole life.

[**AUSTIN:** Yes.] "Cultivate saplings."

AUSTIN: Okay. Time to judge.

JACK: If you draw this next hand and pull a face, I'm gonna spend my Dogma points. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: I bet. You're getting there, because you've pulled a lot of faces already.

JACK: Yeah, I'm— I'm— There is a— Yeah. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] There's a thing about this game, that...

AUSTIN: The way it's, kind of, designed is such that because Jack has already played a bunch of his face cards, that means that— and I have not [**JACK:** No.] that means that the challenges are likely to get harder [**JACK:** Yep.] which are— is not going to be good for him. [**JACK:** Yeah.] [sighs] Alright, let's see here.

[tokens rattling]

AUSTIN: Alright. Increase your Interpretation by one.

[more rattling and clattering]

AUSTIN: And there's three Dogma.

JACK: Cheers.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] And— Yeah. What are you up to?

JACK: Um, I was on— I was on four before and I'm on five! Five Interpretation and one— two— three— four— five— six— seven— eight Dogma.

AUSTIN: Not bad! Alright.

JACK: This is encouraging.

AUSTIN: Where are you going?

JACK: Do I have any more...

AUSTIN: Yep. Now you have more. You're up to four now, so now it's... Four— So, you've— You have— Let's go over your tower. It is—

JACK: [crosstalk] 2 of Diamonds!

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] —the Liberty and Discovery system, the navigation system—

JACK: [crosstalk] Yes, the navigation system.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] 2 of Diamonds.

JACK: The saw bla— The saw boomerang.

AUSTIN: Boomerang thing. Sword. [chuckles] 4 of Clubs.

JACK: The Liberty and Discovery mech [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] and Righteousness.dat [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] which is now just in my [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] mech— running in my mech. Um... I need to tithe before I pick a direction, right?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You do need to tithe first.

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah. We keep forgetting to do tithing.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I— We do keep forgetting to tithe. We—

JACK: Ope— [wheezes laughing]

AUSTIN: Hey, what's up?

JACK: [laughs] No, no...

AUSTIN: Oh, this is just... "Pocono Modern— Ensuring comfortable modern lifestyle through innovative architectural, interior, and product design." It's just—

JACK: [crosstalk] Yeah! It's nice. They're really nice cards.

AUSTIN: Using nice cards.

JACK: This one has my name on it. Um. [**AUSTIN:** Ha.] Okay. Right.

AUSTIN: Tithing.

JACK: [chants] Yeah, tithing! Here we go!

AUSTIN: So now you have to discard four cards.

JACK: Yeah. Or more?

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Right! Right, because they have to equal value.

JACK: Oo-hooh. Let me work out how I do— I can do this. Yeah, I can do this. I can do this.
[inhales] I can do this.

AUSTIN: These are low value relics for now, so... [**JACK:** Hm.] No Courage in your tower. Huh.

JACK: [doesn't think it's funny] Funny. Otherwise fairly evened out. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] Okay. Everybody who has gone and joined the tent city, uh... Their mechs still work, they can still walk around in them, they can still cut trees down on them, but in order to get food chits— food and water chits... Every day you have to press the button marked with a little symbol of food...

You don't need to wonder, just a little symbol will do— And it gives you a 16-digit number, and then you have to take your rigger to the canteen and recite the 16-digit number to the person, who cross-references it and hands you a plate of food. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] If you get the number wrong, no food. That does not work anymore. You just press the food button, and nothing shows up. It just doesn't do anything.

So, to start with, I go out into the woods, and I find 10 of those weird spiny creatures with me and Vanessa and Vanell... Ooh, do they have— No, they don't have combat mechs. They just have— for, like, the electromagnets and—

AUSTIN: No, they have combat mechs now.

JACK: Ooh, they have combat mechs?

AUSTIN: They took them from the other— from the other place.

JACK: Oh, those were combat mechs? [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Aw, man. So I guess these are closer to what we would consider now as riggers. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Yeah? Okay. And we take— We kill 10. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] And it takes a long time, but we carry them back to... the tent city. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] Um... Three company riggers come down, including the boss from earlier. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] And they come down weaponized to try and break up the group [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] And they don't go back.

[card thumps on table]

JACK: 3 of... um, Clubs. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] Take that as you will. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] Uhh... We dig five irrigation trenches to melt the snow.

[card thumps on table]

JACK: Provide the water for tent city. Five is not enough, but it'll do. And then, uh... [chuckles] Uh... Oh, god. Six...

[card thumps on table]

JACK: ...cracks spread from where I flaked the— from where I opened the door, originally, the first time.

[music plays: "Aria Joie Sings The Blues" by Jack de Quidt]

JACK: They dart across the surface of the mountain.

[02:05:05] Day 27 Aboard the Kingdom Come

AUSTIN: Day 27. Though AuDy has remained silent, there is still activity onboard. Orth scolds Mako for eschewing his chores, Jacqui hums a new song loudly as she does her morning workout routine, and Cass picks up the scattercast waves of news reports and political punditry, guessing at what the future might hold. Cass, I'm imagining you're— What do you do while the ship is deep in space?

ART: Uh... I imagine it's rough, right? I don't think Cass has ever been... I guess he¹ has, but only with a military convoy [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] where I bet they officially keep you busy. [**AUSTIN:** Right.] And, I don't know, like... I've been on boats before [**AUSTIN:** Oh, okay.] and I've been on boats for a while, and a day at sea is boring. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] And—

AUSTIN: So, like, a month...

ART: Yeah, a month at sea is probably terrible, and a month in space is probably even worse, right? [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] There's not even looking outside, right, because the— the wonder of a starry void probably gets [**AUSTIN** chuckles] real tired [chuckles] real quick. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah, yeah.] It's probably nice for a little bit— a real little bit, it's probably, [ooh-la-la] "Ooh..."

AUSTIN: You can catch up on your Netflix.

ART: [crosstalk] "Starry void." Yeah. But I don't— I guess I got Cass that's keeping himself busy is probably, like, reading? And reading on a variety of topics, from boning up on medical stuff to history books. I imagine Cass is a history book person.

AUSTIN: Actually, I like this a lot. You wanna do me a favor and just roll... Research?

ART: Sure.

¹ Apostolosian pronouns default to they/them. This would probably include Cass.

AUSTIN: And then just ask— Let's just ask some questions, and see some stuff that Cass might've learned.

ART: ...Nothing. Cass learned nothing. It was a— It was a shame, really.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, boy. Cass... Well, okay. How about this? Ask me something anyway, and I'll... I'll answer it with some other strings, maybe.

ART: Well, I mean, six is, "The MC will answer your question and make a move." Uh.

AUSTIN: Yeah. That's actually pretty useful.

ART: But it's like a— It's like a history question. What's a good history Research question for this?

AUSTIN: What's Cass interested in right now?

ART: Uhh... I mean, I think, on one sense, Cass is interested in nostalgia right now, but—
[**AUSTIN:** Oh, okay.] —practical purpose, Cass is interested in... in... in politics right now, right?

AUSTIN: Yeah. Hm. There's an overlap there, for sure. Which— Which politics is he most interested in?

ART: Probably, um... Diasporan politics.

AUSTIN: Okay! Okay. What's the— So what's the question?

ART: I think it's, "Who or what is Counterweight most valuable to?"

AUSTIN: Hm. Alright, so I think what you find is a document. You're kind of, like, digging through— through the equivalent of JSTOR or something, right? It's a research database filled with old... Not just academic, but mass-audience newspaper-style thing— You know what? It's the sort of thing that's filled with platform papers from the Diaspora, right? There's so much [chuckles] voting in the Diaspora that one of the things that's very popular is just, like, different platform papers on different potential voting outcomes, right? [**ART:** Sure.]

So there was a proposition early on in... So, okay. Reminder that the Diaspora is huge, right? Like, we have this little picture of it. We have this picture of the Righteous Vanguard and the Hands of Grace and all this, right? But the Diaspora itself runs for thousands and thousands— millions of light-years? Billions of light-years? It's like an entire arm of the galaxy at this point.

But this was still a really— The moment that they hit this point, where it reconnected with the OriCon branch of the Milky Way galaxy, was this amazing moment of potential for the future, and the Disaporan people were really divided on it. And there were a number of position papers published about this district— about this sector of space, the Golden Branch star sector.

And there was lots of voting about what should be done there, and this was from hundreds of years ago now, when they first approached this, when this was all still Apostolisian space, and around the same time that Counterweight had already started dipping its toes into the sector. And there were— There was kind of a split over what to do here.

There were a number of candidates— Sorry. [laughs] There were a number of positions [chuckles] that held— It's election season, and so I'm thinking about candidates now— but there were a number of positions and, kind of, academics that held that the best thing to do was to come into this space and to... kind of, form a new path forward with OriCon. One of peace, one of prosperity, one where both sides put aside their differences and continued to expand into the Milky Way galaxy down this arm, closer to the core.

The Divines that sided with that, and their— Again, the candidates that actually were in these Divines are long dead at this point, but were— included familiar names. It included Grace, it included Righteousness, who said this was a place— a time and place for the Diaspora to make good on past problems, and it was time that we as a culture came to terms with the bloody history that we've had with OriCon, and make a clean, fresh start.

There were also people who positioned— who raised the position that doing that would lead to a sort of unsustainable, but also kind of dangerously sustainable, low dissent. A sort of spiral into poverty, a spiral into— kind of, subsistence? Right? Where, like, oh, everyone lives, but there are billions of people who are not being taken care of because no one— because everyone is afraid to make a move.

That economies will actually slow up, that people will fight in these proxy wars instead, and will die and will eventually turn against the state itself because the state will have— will be seen as having failed. And those people said, "Take Counterweight. It is the crossroads for the sector, and whoever holds Counterweight holds the Golden Branch." That is the divide, and that is who it is most valuable for— Anyone who wants to unify the sector.

ART: Sure.

AUSTIN: I'm gonna save my move. [chuckles] I'm saving my move. I will be make— I'll give you a little hint. Or I guess I've already kind of given you a little hint. Or, not a hint, but, you know, I'll show you the barrel of my gun, in GM parlance. Um...

I think you catch a rogue newscast that night that includes images of Ibex on Counterweight shaking hands with representatives of the Hands of Grace, the Minerva Strategic Alliance. There is no one there from the Apostolisian— from the Golden Branch Demarchy, but there is an empty chair. [**ART:** Alright.] And it seems like there are talks.

ART: [worried] Sure.

AUSTIN: I kinda wanted— I do kinda want to talk a little about where Cass is with the Golden Branch Demarchy. So I kind of— I just wanna frame a little scene of— I got this image in my head

the other day of— One of the things that Cass got from his— his— the former leader of the Golden Branch Empire— the Apostolisian Empire, rather— was, like, dinner plates? I really like this notion of just, like, monogrammed Apostolisian Empire cookware? [chuckles]

And I just want a picture of Cass cooking and thinking maybe a little bit about what his history was— or what their history was with the rest of the family. So tell me about one— one thing that Cass cooks, and two— one meal that they had, back before the war.

ART: Umm, I think Cass makes a really good squid ink pasta.

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Mhm? Hmm!

ART: I think that that's a good Apostolisian delicacy.

AUSTIN: Do you have what you need to make that here?

ART: Ooh, that's a good question, isn't it? Uh—

AUSTIN: Yeah. Or is there, like— Is there, like, the sort of thing of, like... You did for the first week [ART: Right.] and then you kind of— You still have the pasta [chuckles] but you're running low on a lot of the other stuff.

ART: Right, we definitely still have flour and eggs and water... [AUSTIN: Right.] Uh— [chuckles] And we probably left with a little bit of squid ink, right? [AUSTIN: Yeah.] Cass likes this meal. There was probably some on board. I don't think that he was necessarily prepared with a months-long supply. [AUSTIN: No.] I also, like, don't know what that technology would look like? Are we at, like, "Oh, sure, you can just synthesize squid ink on your refrigerator."

AUSTIN: I think there are people who have that. I don't think the Kingdom Come has that. I think—

ART: [crosstalk] Yeah, cause it's a broken down old military vessel? [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah. I think the, like— Restaurants might have that, but not just your ship— and, like, luxury vessels certainly do! Even bigger military vessels. Like, the Seventh Sun probably has that, you know? [ART: Yeah.] But not the Kingdom— Divines might even have that.

I was thinking about that a lot the other day. I was thinking about Jerboa in Detachment, and, like— Does he just live in Detachment? And, like— Is there another compartment where he sleeps? And, like, washes himself? Does he dock at those— How often does he return to take a shower? [chuckles] What does he do for food? Stuff like that. I think there's any number of great sci-fi answers to that stuff. Uh, but yeah—

ART: [crosstalk] I think if we were to have a— If there was gonna be a spin-off novel of this franchise— and there should be— [AUSTIN: Yep.] I think the life of a Candidate would be a really

interesting one, and how they relate to their Divine, and what a Divine does. Like, does Detachment make it so Jerboa doesn't have to sleep or eat? And—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Right. And I don't think—

ART: [crosstalk] —do all the Divines do that? Is that why they die so quickly?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] No, I think it's— I think it's unique from Divine to Divine. I definitely think that's the— and you're right, that that could totally be the sort of thing a Divine does, especially with, like, sleep, and especially— I could definitely see some body horror, or even just, like... sort of, um... What is the director's name who I'm thinking of? Uhh... Uhh, oh, my god. Why am I blanking?

ART: Give me a hint. Unless it's Eli Roth.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Uh... Uh, *Existenz*— It's not Eli Roth. Uh, *Existenz* and... Umm... Uhh... Fuck, I can picture the dude with the hand that's all flesh and it's a gun. Uh, *Videodrome*. Uhh...

ART: Oh! Um. Um.

AUSTIN: This is the worst. We are the worst nerds. We are the worst movie fans in the world.

[keyboard clacking]

AUSTIN: We're just gonna look it up, because I'm the worst. I'm gonna see it and yell.

ART: Cronenberg!

AUSTIN: Cronenberg! Yeah. Uh-huh. [**ART** grunts] Good. Good job. You got it. You got it. Cronenberg. I could see some Cronenberg-esque shit in some of the Divines. We even gestured towards that a little bit with Integrity, that Integrity on Sokrates does have a kind of Cronenberg-esque metal-in-flesh— It's hard to tell where one ends and one begins... thing going on. So yeah, I definitely think that's the case for some Divines, and others are just totally externalized.

ART: But, like, to get back to the cooking [**AUSTIN:** Yes!] I think you could fake it, right?

[**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] Or you could fake it enough to, like— You add a lot of salt, you do a little bit of work on that, and you can sort of approximate it, right? You can [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] get it... It's— The color is gonna be the thing you can't mimic.

AUSTIN: Not at all, yeah. Well—

ART: [crosstalk] Because nothing— nothing's really— nothing you cook with is really that black.

AUSTIN: Does— Does Cass use just food coloring to fake it?

ART: I think he would if he could but I don't even think in the future that black food coloring [AUSTIN laughs] is gonna be a staple of kitchens, right?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] On a spaceship? Yeah.

ART: Yeah, what else would you use that on? Like, "Oh, I decided to make a chocolate chip cookies and make them look fucking gross." [AUSTIN laughs] I dunno, maybe for Space Halloween or something, but—

AUSTIN: Yeah, yeah. Which it was not, so...

ART: Yeah, which it was not. Uh. So yeah, I think it just starts to look a little drier and taste worse. Like, it tastes— You're gesturing toward it, you're not...

AUSTIN: Hitting it.

ART: [crosstalk] You're not making it.

AUSTIN: Is Cass making this meal for everyone on the ship or just for Cass— for herself?

ART: I think that at the beginning it was a communal meal, right? It's— That's— That's how—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, I like that a lot.

ART: That's how you do it, right? This is for everyone. This is what we have.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yeah, maybe this is, like—

ART: [crosstalk] And as the supplies dwindled it became less and less. It was like, "Hey, here's— There's some leftovers in the fridge."

AUSTIN: Okay. This is the—

ART: [crosstalk] And it's, like, portioned.

AUSTIN: This is the third Sunday. And you've made this meal the first two. Maybe it's the fourth Sunday. I like it even better if it's the last Sunday in the month. This also helps me because it helps me show the other half of this move that I made before [both chuckle] so—

It's, like, the last Sunday of the month, and you've made this meal every weekend on, like— again, whatever space Sunday looks like, whatever that word is— for whatever Sunday would be on Counterweight, or whatever the day is where everybody has the day off. Or, not everybody— Everybody with a certain income level or above has the day off [chuckles] [ART: Sure.] and it's traditionally thought of as being a day that you spend with family and friends, even though, more and more, those people all work on those days.

And the first time, everybody shows up. And the second time, less so. And now Cass is making that big bowl of pasta, and it doesn't even occur, maybe? Maybe it's just, like... I dunno, it's up

to you, but maybe it's just like, "Oh, these are leftover— I'm just making leftovers." It goes from "I'm making a meal for everyone" to "I'm making my food for the week."

ART: Yeah, and I also imagine a little bit of it's, like— He could make a lot more now that there's not the real ingredients [whispers] but it kind of [**AUSTIN** chuckles] tastes gross. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] I don't wanna speak for Aria and Mako [**AUSTIN** chuckles] and their taste here, but this isn't— this is less-good food. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Yeah. Yeah. Like, the first week, it was like, "Aw, this is really good!" And the second week was like, "Oh, this again?" And then the third week was like, "...why isn't this black?" [laughs] Like, "You're just making regul— Where's— What's— Oh, boy." And then just nothing this week. [**ART:** Yeah.] So what's the meal that Cass had that comes to mind while cooking.

ART: I... I think there was a banquet at the beginning of the war [**AUSTIN:** Mmm.] as kind of, like, a— This might've even been, like, a traditional Apostolisian war ritual, right?

There's the big table and the monarch sits at the Head, and his² children are on his right side and his wife, or, you know, spouse, and other dignitaries are on the left, and as you go down the table there's generals and admirals [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] and— and— and even, like, there's a colonel and there's important recognized military figures, you know? High ranks, and then people with distinguished service records.

And this is a big deal, and everyone dines with the monarch, but you're not really, right? Because it's a long table. So only, really— The only people really dining with the monarch are his family. [**AUSTIN:** Right.] It's Euanthe, and it's Sokrates, and it's Cass, and it's their parents. We almost never— We haven't even touched on what Cass's other parent [**AUSTIN:** No.] is like...

AUSTIN: At all.

ART: I think, because of the weirdness about the Apostolisian... The— The difference of the—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Like, pronoun situation, and the...

ART: [crosstalk] Yeah, the pronoun situation makes it different, right? Like, it's [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] two parents, and I— it's hard to, kind of, conceive of what this looks like.

AUSTIN: Without falling into either describing heterosexual couples or homosexual couples, or, like... Yeah. [**ART:** Right.] Because we only have a limited pool of reference, and that's frustrating. [crosstalk] And we also don't have the six hours it would take to hammer out something else, and to bring in a consultant, and really work on this? We—

ART: [crosstalk] But I imagine that they both look... just glorious, right? All— [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] All five of them, probably. These are their best clothes. These are— The monarch is wearing a fantastic crown [**AUSTIN:** Right.] and all of the family are wearing finery, and they sit and they

² Apostolosian pronouns default to they/them.

talk, and first they talk about how they're gonna win this war, and how glorious the Empire's reign will be over the whole system. But then it becomes just a normal talk, right? Then it becomes, like, "What branch of the service are you all going to join? Oh, that's interesting—"

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Is this—

ART: "You should talk to so-and-so about that." Like...

AUSTIN: [chuckles] Is this a situation of, like— You don't actually see your parents so often, and this is the rare occasion where there's a— kind of a check-in?

ART: I imagine that they did a lot of hands-on parenting until we're of school age. **[AUSTIN: Okay.]** And then it's kind of like, "You're with people. These are your teachers." **[AUSTIN: Right.]** I don't know if it's formally boarding school, but, you know, it is, right? **[AUSTIN: Right.]**

This might be— This might be one of a dozen times that Cass can remember all five of them being in the same place. **[AUSTIN: Right.]** And the other ones might've been coronations, or even sillier things, right? Like if they opened a new house of Parliament, or whatever. Like if they rebuild the Parliamentary building... **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** I don't know if there's a Parliament. Let's not— Let's not get...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Let's not commit to things quite yet, yeah, yeah, yeah. [both chuckle] Especially now that things have changed dramatically. [laughs]

ART: Yeah. But I imagine that there's some sort of symbolic collection of— of— of aristocracy that there is.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Sure. At the very least— Yeah, at the very least, representatives from the different Eidolon houses, and— you know, yeah. Sure. There's definitely something.

ART: Yeah, there's definitely some sort of gathering.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ART: And this is— this is the— this is one of— yeah, under a dozen meetings of the family, and this was the last one. They never were all together again. Euanthe got hurt in the war. Sokrates and Cass were both assigned to far-flung posts. And... And, yeah, their parents didn't really— I mean, they made it. They lived through the war, right? But they didn't— **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** But, in a way, they didn't. You know? They were never this warm again, with each other or with the family. Uh—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Did Cass ever go home after the war, or did Cass just stay on Counterweight?

ART: I think Cass did stay on Counterweight.

AUSTIN: Did Ca— What was—

ART: [crosstalk] But he probably corresponded with his [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] parents. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] And I think you can see the way that the stress of a losing war of conquest would have [**AUSTIN** exhales] on a marriage. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah, yeah.] That's not what either of them really signed on for, right? This was gonna be a quick and decisive war, and instead [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] it was a slow defeat.

AUSTIN: And, like, painful. Not just a little bit, but... This wasn't a— You fought until a white peace, and you kind of didn't lose anything. They lost, kind of everything.

ART: They lost everything, and they lost everything very quickly, right? Like, Euanthe was the heir, and the heir was seriously hospitalized early in the war. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Like, it started with, "This is our child. Our child is probably not going to make it."

AUSTIN: Right. And then they lost, you know, a pla— kind of a long-standing religious center that turned into a fucking theme park. And then they lost Counterweight, which was the heart of commerce and culture. And then they lost— They just lost everything. They don't have— Whether personal or political, whether intimate or public, they just— loss after loss after loss. And Sokrates, of course, turns on them.

ART: Right. It's sort of like how I imagine the Showa emperor, the emperor— Japanese emperor who was [**AUSTIN:** Hmm.] emperor during World War II. [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] I imagine his life must have been very strange. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Where he grows up and he's the— he's God. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] And then he loses the war and he has to say he's not God. [**AUSTIN:** Right]. And then he has to live for 40 more years. [**AUSTIN:** [laughs] Right.]

And he— he must have been happy, right? He dies, and Japan is better than it was when he was born, and however much he wants to take credit for that or feel responsible for that, he should, but he lost as much as anyone's ever lost, right?

AUSTIN: Right. Especially when you've been told that you have something. And that something is yours to take, right?

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Yeah. It's interesting. So I guess all of this is running through Cass's head.

ART: Probably not the World War II stuff. He probably doesn't know World War...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] No, he didn't read that much history. I do think— I've been thinking a lot about who knows what about the history of the galaxy in general, and I really like the notion of some people just— There's just so much data. There's so much information at this point, because we don't live in a—

We do live in a world, in this setting, in which some information has been lost, right? Like, the other half of this game, the AuDy/Liberty and Discover half [**ART**: Yeah.] is very much about something that has been lost to time. But it is really fascinating to me to think that last episode started– or, two episodes ago started with Ibex referencing falcons and vultures, and those don't exist. And, like– I– You know? Does he just like animals? [**ART** chuckles] All of the candidate names are mammals, and none of them have seen what those animals are. You know?

ART: It's not a *Bladerunner* situation, where there are very rich people who have synthetic versions?

AUSTIN: It— It might be, but probably not all the way at the edges of the known galaxy, you know? Of the established— Like, maybe back near Earth [laughs] it is, or back in the heart of the Diasporan Empire, it— or, not empire— the Diasporan Republic, it is, but not here. You know? [ART: Sure.] Or maybe here. Maybe Calliope, right? Maybe those genomes have been saved or something, but no one knows— no one has seen a real bear in forever [laughs] you know?

ART: I sort of like the idea that JoyPark has this, like, zoo—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] I like that a lot.

ART: —of animals that no one has any context for. [AUSTIN: Yeah.] Like, here's a bear. What does a bear do? [AUSTIN laughs] What— Where would this have lived? How is this a— An animal out of context is such an odd thing.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Yeah. Totally. I love it. [ART laughs] That totally makes sense, too.

ART: [crosstalk] Like, what does a lion look like if you've never seen a desert? Or a savannah?

AUSTIN: Or a savannah, or, like, any of the other things in the food chain of a lion? You know? [ART: Right.] That's really good. That's just a big— Like, is it scary? Is it— You don't have a history of what— “Oh, it says here it eats things. Weird.” [laughs] You know? “Oh, it roars. Okay. Sure.” Um. Yeah, I think that's really good, and I think that's the moment... I— I— You know, we haven't quite— We haven't recorded all of these yet, these little one-offs, but I like this as the moment that it happens.

[music plays: “Rigour” by Jack de Quidt]

[02:29:44] The Pilgrimage of Wreath-Making

JACK: You know when it's really late, and you can't get to sleep, and you hear the power cycle in your fridge turn off? And you didn't realize that the sound was there until it stopped. You hear the quiet house.

AUSTIN: And then you hear, you realize, that that sound was always there. It woke you up in the morning.

JACK: This is the opposite of that. [AUSTIN: Hm.] The sound's been there all along, but it's— it's— it's— it's... We have become aware of it. Whew. Aw, man. And then, as though it was always there, one of the irrigation channels we dug moved. And it's an arm, and it becomes servers, and it sits up. It's staggeringly tall. And then it stands up.

AUSTIN: And it's the mountain. It's as big as the mountain.

JACK: Yeah. Thunderous avalanche down one side of the mountain as it stands, and there, as it's been all along, is the Divine Rigour.

[music begins fading out]

AUSTIN: [deep inhale] Jack drew a card. The Joker– The Adversary. When a joker appears in either players' hand, the Divine must play it face up, immediately, next to the tower. The Pilgrim may play it face up immediately, or they may hold on to its power, secreting it away from their lord. Whoever first draws the Joker is the one that narrates its initial appearance every other time it appears. If the Joker has been secreted away, and is revealed through play–

Like turning to the Divine, and I pull it out of your hand, which is a thing we haven't talked about yet, but there are ways for me to see into Jack's hand at certain points– The Pilgrim has to explain a narrative connection, explaining why the Adversary has a connection to that Pilgrim. It becomes, effectively, a free level in your tower, and it has powers.

Passively, once per turn, at any point, the Pilgrim may choose to bypass all remaining trials and recover the relic. Receive four Disappointment points– or, give me four Disappointment tokens. You can also spend it to discard it. You can just discard it, and get– to remove one Disappointment token. It is much more disappointing to stand by the Adversary than it is rewarding to step away. It is what is expected.

JACK: Does it go here?

AUSTIN: No, it's not next– It's not an actual new tower level.

JACK: It's just in the tower.

AUSTIN: Yeah, just, like, to the side of it.

JACK: Okay. Do I draw up to five again, or does the fact that I drew the Adversary mean that I have four this time?

AUSTIN: No, I think you draw up.

JACK: Yeah? I just put it down and draw up again?

AUSTIN: I think so.

JACK: Okay.

AUSTIN: What do you do?

JACK: Oh, do I– Do I...

AUSTIN: So, you're keeping it there for now?

JACK: Um... [deep breath] If I keep it, it won't affect the next Judgment. The Divine can't judge you based on the presence of the Adversary in your tower. The Divine can't— It's not part of the rules. [**AUSTIN:** Eh.] The only way you'd judge me would be if I—

AUSTIN: Do you want me to re-read what those are?

JACK: Yeah. But I don't think you can judge me based on the presence of the Adversary.

AUSTIN: Is that what you think, or is that what Chital thinks?

JACK: Oh, no, that's what I think. I don't think that you can judge me. I don't—

AUSTIN: [overlapping] Did you live up to your own laws? Did you find loopholes in your own laws? Did you break your own laws?

JACK: You'd have to think of a— Well, actually, hang on a second. [laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah. Jack looks at his laws.

JACK: Uhh...

AUSTIN: Did you honor my relics? Did you covet them? Did you disavow them? Distance yourself from them?

JACK: So, I need to ask mys— Actually, no, dude. I am super keeping this here, because I've been hemorrhaging face cards. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] And that's the other thing. Certain levels of this game can be played tactically. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] I mean, it's fundamentally a narrative game, but— but— yeah. Okay, what's this pilgrimage? [laughs nervously] I got your poker face. [laughs]

AUSTIN: [utterly devoid of warmth] I'm smiling at Jack. What direction are you going? You can now be more specific still.

JACK: Yeah. Um... I am going to be more specific. Yeah, I really wanna see what you're gonna do. One of the things that I really like about this game is that pilgrimages scale.

AUSTIN: They do.

JACK: So I'm gonna leave the Liberty and Discovery...

AUSTIN: Machine.

JACK: ...rigger.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JACK: I guess.

AUSTIN: Divine.

JACK: Divine. [chuckles nervously] And... Oh— I'm— I'm 55! I've been feeling tireder [AUSTIN: Mmm.] lately. I've been feeling tireder, so even getting out of it is a little tough, and I'm going to go into tent city, and I'm gonna go and talk to whoever at the moment is the de-facto boss.

AUSTIN: So, Rigour at this point is just...

JACK: I guess Rigour— [laughs]

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You're in the shadow of Rigour.

JACK: [crosstalk] In a very Rigour move, Rigour is standing there.

AUSTIN: Yeah. And humming.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: We're in— Yeah.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: It's that refrigerator hum. [JACK: Yeah.] It was this screech [JACK: Yes.] and then it became this...

JACK: It's— Yeah, or— or is it the other way around. In waking up, did it screech, and now it is stilled again?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] That's what I mean.

JACK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Oh, okay. Sure.

JACK: But now— Now we can't— We can't not hear the sound anymore.

AUSTIN: So you're going to talk— Who're you going to talk to?

JACK: Whoever has established themselves as the de-facto boss, and the way I'm doing this is I'm...

AUSTIN: That's you.

JACK: Uh... Whoever... Who moves all the tents here? Who said, "Alright, gang. Let's go"?

AUSTIN: You don't remember?

JACK: No.

AUSTIN: That was you.

JACK: When did I do that?

AUSTIN: You don't remember. But they act as if it was you.

JACK: Are you saying that I, Jack, don't remember? I don't think I set up a tent. I didn't— What did I do there? I...

AUSTIN: You don't remember.

JACK: [exasperated] I can't tell whether you're talking to Chital or me!

AUSTIN: [poker face] Hm.

JACK: Okay. Great. Fine.

AUSTIN: Divines are funny.

JACK: Y- Yeah, they are. Huh. Okay, so in that case— Yes, I'm gonna go and talk to, uhh... Vanessa.

AUSTIN: Vanessa's in the room, inside the mountain.

JACK: Do we have a name for this pilgrimage?

AUSTIN: Oh, yes. This is the Pilgrimage of Wreath-Making. [**JACK:** Oooh.] You don't find her in the room. You find her outside. In spite of everything, Vanessa is preparing to lead the group in a... a sort of monthly ritual. It's a fun dance. Once a month, Rigour lets you have a day off— an evening off. Normally it's not the same day as anyone else. [**JACK** laughs] But once in a while...

JACK: Oh, I really like that.

AUSTIN: Once in a while, it all lines up. And you get five or six people together.

JACK: I get my day off with John? I hate John.

AUSTIN: Yeah. But you do dance. [**JACK:** Yeah.] You do dances. You have an old book in the library filled with old books— or had, back at Rigour's base, back at the base of the Conservation. And in the book it just has a bunch of old dance moves in it. And she's preparing.

She's made a handful of wreaths out of fallen branches from the timber that you're not cutting. [**JACK** chuckles] And she plans on putting them up in a circle around a few trees to mark out the dancing area. And there's a big bonfire in the middle. And you walk with her as she's doing this.

And then Rigour makes a noise... And 12 lines sprout from its shoulders, running down, through the trees, cutting into them. They fall. And then, from the lines, on the lines, 12 figures ride down, guns blazing.

[card flips]

AUSTIN: 2 of Clubs.

JACK: [exhales] Remind me again. Grace's Candidate is called...

AUSTIN: Kobus.

JACK: No, that– that's Loyalty.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] No, that's Loyalty. Jer– No, not Jerboa.

JACK: No, that's Detachment. It's– She's got a fantastic name.

AUSTIN: Vicuna.

JACK: Vicuna! Yes. I was looking at the wiki the other day. Nice work, wiki team. [both chuckle] I gave a thumbs-up to the microphone, because that's where you all live. [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] Vicuna can summon Grace [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] from a distance.

AUSTIN: Yeah, she can.

JACK: Because when the fight happens... [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Okay. So, the saw blade reaches me first. [**AUSTIN:** Hmm.] Hmm, but it takes a detour, at first. And the detour goes through somebody, and then it goes through a wire. [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] And all around me, people are running back into the tents, and, you know, the– they're moving so fast that they're tripping over the guide ropes that are holding the tents up, and it's just a nightmare.

And an armed man or woman comes towards me, weapon raised. Shoots at me. Misses. And as I turn back to them, I see them just picked up by the arm of Liberty and Discovery, and thrown against a rock, or against a tent [**AUSTIN:** Hm.] or something. 4 of Clubs.

[card smacks on table]

JACK: What's Rigour doing? Is Rigour just watching at this point?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yes. It's vibrating and there's lots of noise coming from it. [**JACK:** Hm.] It... It takes you a moment, but you recognize– Are you in Liberty and Discovery at this point?

[**JACK:** Uhh...] Does it grab you?

JACK: Yeah, I think it grabs me.

AUSTIN: Yeah. You jump into it? [**JACK:** Yes.] Okay. You recognize what it's doing. It's a similar sort of the– the magnetic power that was running out in the desert.

JACK: Rigour is doing this? [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] Yes. Okay.

AUSTIN: And now, with the upgraded system that you have, you can see that it's powering things. **[JACK: Hm!]** Six figures, coming— Three over the horizon to the west— Nope, to the east. I'm looking at the map. Back towards base. And three from the top of the mountain. Military things. New riggers. New models. One of them you recognize the pilot of. It's Keer. It's the one that you left in the oasis.

JACK: Oh, wow. Okay.

AUSTIN: Very dedicated worker, he is.

JACK: The one whose cockpit I popped?

AUSTIN: Yeah. You shoulda killed him. Or not. You tell me. A 6 of Clubs. **[singing threateningly]** There is the cedar. **[JACK chuckles]** There is the pine.

JACK: But alien pine. No, it's the same song.

AUSTIN: I think it's the same song.

JACK: These aren't the trees anymore, but you know.

AUSTIN: **[crosstalk]** No. These are metallic trees, right? We've talked about this off-mic, of, like—

JACK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. These trees are just— just the worst trees. **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** And I guess... it means the insects must be terrible, right?

AUSTIN: Yeah. We've seen them already.

JACK: **[laughs]** Oh, yeah! We have seen them already. Um... Okay. 6 of... **[sighs]**

[card thumps on table]

JACK: I'm gonna call out to the other people **[AUSTIN: Hm.]** around me, and I'm going to tell them— **[laughs]** I'm gonna tell them that it's gonna be... We've beaten them once before. We can leave the zones. We're good. We're gonna be fine. And in the mech, I'm going to approach Rigour.

[card flips]

8 of Courage.

AUSTIN: The people rally and push back at the machines around you, cutting a way for you to approach Rigour. Oh, when you near it, it moves. It kneels, and in its shadow, you see a figure move above you, riding up one of the lines. A rigger deactivates behind you, and above you Keer enters Rigour. Its hands come together in a clap...

[card thumps on table]

AUSTIN: ...with you in the middle. 9 of Clubs. [singing threateningly] Oak tree, redwood, ash, ash, ash.

[card thumps on table]

JACK: Jack of Clubs. The saw blade comes again, and this time it is cutting one of the hands holding me. And I think that it cuts at a gash in my shoulder as it goes, and... I think that, when it does that, it pulls back a little, as though it's gone... [**AUSTIN** chuckles] And I think I fall, but I'm holding onto one of the tall fingers of the combat rigger. Does it–

AUSTIN: Wait, the combat rigger? Or... Oh– Oh, the Rigour?

JACK: [crosstalk] Keer's... Keer's...

AUSTIN: Oh, Keer– No, he's out of that. He's in Rigour.

JACK: Oh.

AUSTIN: He left it and rode back up.

JACK: [crosstalk] Okay, I guess the fingers that were grabbing me. [**AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Whose fingers are those?

AUSTIN: Rigour's.

JACK: Rigour's fing– hands. This is gigantic! [**AUSTIN:** Yes.] Okay, so I guess I'm not so much... Yeah, I'm... Almost– I'm carving metallic scales off this thing's finger, and it barely– [imitates metal tearing] But it gives me a little breathing room.

AUSTIN: And it holds you in its hand, and it looks at you. And the Liberty and Discovery system shuts down. [**JACK** chuckles] And Righteousness shuts down. [vicious] And you're a person in a machine, and it's not even your machine. How could it have been? You are small. You are so small that this doesn't matter. There is a galaxy [**JACK** chuckles nervously] that is so much larger than you, that– One small rebellion does nothing.

[card smacks on table]

AUSTIN: [hateful] You're insignificant. You aren't the spruce. You aren't the pine. You aren't the fir. You aren't the cedar. You are a walnut. And you will be cracked. Ace of Courage.

JACK: Ha ha ha! Ohh... I should've... I should've spent these Dogma points.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Hrm. They're out of my hand now, you can't– You can't spend those Dogma points once they're out of my hand.

JACK: I got this. [taps card three times]

AUSTIN: You do have that. You do have the Rigour Adversary card. Yeah, it's out still, and it says—

(as Rigour): And you're My machine.

JACK: [devastated] Ha ha ha. Ohhh.... [beatboxes nervously] Okay. Um...

AUSTIN: So a thing about the Ace here is that the only way that he can play a card is if it's another Ace or if it's a lower Heart, and if it's a lower Heart, then he gets a Disappointment point.

JACK: Uh, should we go over turning to the Divine? [chuckles nervously]

AUSTIN: Sure. Do you wanna talk about it? **[JACK: Yeah.]** Before you make a decision? **[JACK: Yeah.]** Okay. So, the Pilgrim can turn to the Divine when they don't have or— or don't want? To spend their cards?

JACK: Yep. We had a big discussion about whether or not it should be optional.

AUSTIN: We did.

JACK: Ummmm... and I can't remember where we came down.

AUSTIN: I thought we said we couldn't. You have to— If you can try, you might have to. **[JACK: Oh, okay.]** I'll read it to you. It says if the Pilgrim can't do any of these things— Disappoint, Interpret [laughs] or do Dogma— and they have to turn to the Divine, narrate how you turn to the Divine to request aid.

In this, the Divine solves the problem for them, from a divine perspective, but draws one random card from their hand— from the Pilgrim's hand. They set that card aside, and can reintroduce it as a new trial **[JACK chuckles]** to this pilgrimage, or any other pilgrimage, at any point. The Divine then narrates a solution. The Divine takes one Disappointment token.

So this is why it's like this. If you're going to Disappoint, you can just Disappoint. **[JACK: Yes.]** It should be— You don't have the possibility to do anything else.

JACK: Yes. The Orion Conservation Conglomerate aren't monsters. **[AUSTIN: Hm.]** And, in the same booklet that teaches you about cultivations **[AUSTIN: Mhm.]** and tells you about your off days **[AUSTIN scoffs]** there is a subheading that's "Counseling". **[AUSTIN: Hm!]**

And the "Counseling" section is two sentences. And it says, "When in doubt, remember: You've beaten your worst days before." Full stop. **[AUSTIN chuckles]** "Tomorrow, you'll be more than ready to cut down trees!" Exclamation point! And so, standing there, in Rigour's hand, Chital thinks about this book, and thinks—

(as Chital): [whispers] “You have beaten your worst days before...” I’ve beaten my worst days before...

JACK: And then as if they can’t stop themselves, they think—

(as Chital): [whispers] Tomorrow, I’m gonna be able to cut down trees again!

[card thumps on table]

JACK: It’s not enough. [**AUSTIN** chuckles] 5 of Hearts. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: It tosses you. [**JACK** laughs]

[card flips]

AUSTIN: I’ve just turned the relic over. It is a 5 of Hearts. [**JACK** sighs] It tosses you far away. Over the new mountain.

JACK: [laughs] Just, in this direction? Off the map we drew—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Off the map we’ve drawn. And you land in a lake. Not a frozen one. A bit more... suitable for swimming and such. And when you crawl out— When Liberty and Discovery crawls to the shore, it spits you out onto the beach. And there, on the shore of the lake, you find a little hermit crab, and it pokes its head out of its shell. It doesn’t fear You.

JACK: [long sigh] [sings nervously] Everything’s good. Everything’s great! I can see a willow tree. Over there. [chuckles] Okay, so this is the— Oh, my god. The tower is getting...

AUSTIN: The tower’s very big.

JACK: And the problem is, this is the penultimate... penultimate floor?

AUSTIN: There is one more floor. [**JACK:** Yeah.] Six floors total, yes. [**JACK:** Uh-huh.] Yes. [**JACK:** Okay.] 9 of Courage.

JACK: [worried the hermit crab might not be very small] How big is this hermit crab, on this alien planet?

AUSTIN: About the size of your fist.

JACK: [chuckles, relieved] Okay, okay, okay. Right. Fine. What’s it hermiting in? [**AUSTIN:** Um...] That’s a verb, right?

AUSTIN: Yeah. What is it? I can’t decide if it’s natural or not. I think it’s natural. I think it’s just a really pretty shell. [**JACK:** Yeah.] Pearlescent.

JACK: Okay. [laughs] Okay. So I take off my baseball cap [**AUSTIN:** Mhm.] and I scoop up some water in my baseball cap, which all goes out through the hole [both laugh] in the—

AUSTIN: Yes.] in the other side, so then I, like— I snap the [imitates snapping] the cap, and I fold it over so it makes a little bucket, and I scoop it up.

And it drains out, but it drains out slowly. And I kind of... [chuckles] I guess I just sort of dunk the hermit crab in it, so it doesn't dry out. **AUSTIN:** Uh-huh.] And just sort of put it on the cockpit of Liberty and Discovery. [whispers] Good, fine. You can just stay. **AUSTIN:** Yeah.] Uhh... Oh, you should have described it first...

AUSTIN: I should've— No, no, no. I describe how it changes. **JACK:** Mmm.] In fact, we're at five floors now. You don't get to say anything about how it changes the world.

JACK: Okay. Sure. Yeah, I've placed it, damply, on the— on the— What is it called? Console!

AUSTIN: The console, yeah. That night... Are you walking back, or are you staying here? What're you doing?

JACK: I think I want to go back? **AUSTIN:** Okay.] But I think failing that 5, and also being cut by that saw **AUSTIN:** Yeah.] I think I realize—

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Oh, I need a Disappointment token from you.

JACK: [laughs] Okay.

[tokens rattling]

AUSTIN: From the Disappointment you did.

JACK: [while digging around for tokens] Uh, I think I realize that it's— it's— [defeated] I can't go back tonight.

AUSTIN: Okay.

JACK: I can still Super see Rigour, right? Just on the horizon?

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Yeah. Just on the— over the horizon. And at first you see fire, the smoke coming up over the mountain, and you hear the sound of gunshots... Distant sounds, like cawing, that could be screaming. It's hard to tell. And here's the thing that's strange. They're louder than Rigour.

JACK: And I don't get to say anything.

AUSTIN: You don't get to say anything.

JACK: When does the— Does the Pilgrim get any increased authorship? Or does their authorship only decrease?

AUSTIN: It only decreases.

JACK: As the game goes on? **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** Yeah. Great.

AUSTIN: Mhm. Well, no, you get more authorship about where you're going.

JACK: Yeah, that's true. Yes.

AUSTIN: And what you're looking for.

JACK: I can't even be cross with you as the GM on this one, because **[laughs]** I wrote these rules, too! **[AUSTIN: Yep!]** Okay! I'm paying— Oh, Jesus Christ...

AUSTIN: Did you. Oh, Jack. Oh, Jack. Oh, Jack.

JACK: **[groans]** There's a thing that happens.

AUSTIN: **[crosstalk]** There is a thing that happens.

JACK: **[crosstalk]** Which is that— Diligent fans of packs of cards will know **[chuckles]** there are two Jokers.

AUSTIN: There are two Jokers.

JACK: Which means that there are four Jokers...

AUSTIN: Oh, Jack.

JACK: ...in a game of The Tower.

AUSTIN: Ohh, Jack...

JACK: Now— If you... **[laughs]** If you have a Joker on the table when the second Joker arrives, a really bad thing happens, and I can't remember what it is, but I know it's really very bad, and I've just drawn the blue Joker.

AUSTIN: **[inhale]** Oh, boy.

JACK: Where— Where do I put this one? If— It fires, doesn't it? Doesn't the original one fire?

[AUSTIN: Yeah.] So I just instantly win this next pilgrimage and hand you bazillion...

AUSTIN: Six... **[JACK: Oh, wow.]** Oh, first of all, I need to finish— I need to finish— I think you Judgment before you draw. So, let me go back and judge. You hold onto that. But I need to judge you...

JACK: **[crosstalk]** And I need to pay a tithe. I was cr— I was drawing up to pay a tithe.

AUSTIN: Right, I should have judged you before you drew.

JACK: Okay. **[laughs]** So, wh— **[laughs]** Okay. I'm just gonna leave him here.

AUSTIN: Yeah, just leave him there.

JACK: And then I'll draw another...

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] Uhh... So, Judgment. Let me do Judgment.

[pause]

AUSTIN: [deep sigh] Okay, let's see. I'm gonna do your laws. One second. [chuckles]

JACK: Oh, I didn't make a law after that last one.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] You need to make a law. So make a law.

JACK: [crosstalk] Okay, I'm gonna make a law right now. Umm... Which is... [laughs] This is the law. [AUSTIN: Mhm.] "Remember..." [AUSTIN scoffs] "...you have beaten your worst days," except "Remember" is underlined. [AUSTIN: Hm.] This is a thing you have to do. Remember.

AUSTIN: Yep. Oh, Chital. Ohh, Chital.

JACK: [chuckles] [breathes deeply]

AUSTIN: Give me three Disappointment. You get one Dogma.

JACK: For the Judgment? [AUSTIN: Yeah.] I cultivated at least one sapling.

AUSTIN: "I only murdered one person. I didn't murder 7-8 billion people. I only did the murder once."

JACK: [laughs] Still a murderer!

AUSTIN: Still a murderer. "I only coveted once."

JACK: What did I covet?

AUSTIN: Nothing. But you— But you didn't cultivate.

JACK: [splutters] I— Cul— T— Fu— Dude— Did you see how damp? My hat is?

AUSTIN: That'll be alright. Yeah, truly, you cultivated the hermit crab. But not the saplings.

JACK: [deep inhale] [backtalk] The rule was "Cultivate saplings," not "Cultivate Those saplings."
[AUSTIN grunts] Okay, yep, you're the Divine. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Mhm. Alright. Tithing. [both chuckle]

JACK: Okay. So I'm tithing for these.

AUSTIN: Yes. Draw— Tithe.

JACK: [crosstalk] I've drawn up to five.

AUSTIN: Remember, you don't need to show that Joker.

JACK: No, I know. [**AUSTIN:** Okay.] No, I know. [chuckles]

AUSTIN: Wait, did you draw up— What'd you do?

JACK: I drew up to five.

AUSTIN: Well, we have to finish— One of those was this.

JACK: Oh, so we have to finish? Okay.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] We have to finish this before we do anything else.

JACK: I showed you this, because you're the Divine of Liberty and Discovery.

AUSTIN: Yeah. That's good. That's good.

JACK: I feel that you— [chuckles]

AUSTIN: I should know that. But— So, what happens is, when you have one— You can only have one Adversary out once you... [**JACK:** Yeah.] Can only have one Joker on the table at once.

[**JACK:** Yeah.] If you've kept the other one on...

JACK: Which I have.

AUSTIN: ...which you have, it automatically does its active ability [**JACK:** Uh-huh?] which means that it automatically finishes that pilgrimage [**JACK:** It does.] and you get this. [**JACK:** I do.] Going up to the 6 of Diamonds.

JACK: Let's get rid of that guy. What is that? Well, A: How does the Adversary help me out here, and B: What is that... uh, relic?

AUSTIN: [chuckles dryly] You wake up the next morning. And get into your mech. And you see a new point on the map, and it says it's guiding you to a better tomorrow. [**JACK** laughs] Oh, that sounds nice! And you walk in that direction, and you see a group of refugees from that previous tent city. Among them is Vanelle. What is it? It's a 6 of— of— [**JACK:** Wits.] Wits? Yeah.

(as Vanelle): She died, Chital. [**JACK** inhales deeply]

AUSTIN: And he hands you a wreath. [**JACK:** Ah.] And he says—

(as Vanelle): Ah. This was good fun, this was a mistake. They'll take us back. We're gonna go back. They let us live! They let us live. We put down our arms, and they let Us live.

JACK: [exhales deeply] Okay. So I guess I take the wreath?

AUSTIN: It's about the size of... a door. Like, a big door. That's what she'd been working on for quite some time. It was gonna be the center tree.

JACK: [grunts as if in pain] Oh, the wreaths are for the trees? **[AUSTIN: Hm?]** The wreaths are for the trees?

AUSTIN: They were gonna— She was gonna hang them on the trees...

JACK: [crosstalk] Oh, oh, oh, I see. I— **[AUSTIN: And then—]** You mean, like a— like a— like a sash. Like a swag. Like a...

AUSTIN: Like a wreath. Like a Christmas wreath. Like, bent branches.

JACK: [crosstalk] Oh, you can't call That a wreath!

AUSTIN: That's what I'm talking about. It's that but it's as big as a door. **[JACK: Okay.]** It's a giant thing that was going to hang at the front of the biggest tree— **[JACK: Right.]** Under— And so— That was gonna, like, "Oh, look. This is our celebration area."

JACK: Okay. I'm gonna... Well, that's the way The Tower works. I'm gonna put it on the head of Liberty and Discovery.

AUSTIN: Like a crown.

JACK: Yeah, um... Yeah. Like a crown. I'm trying to work out— I wanna— I'm trying to work out a clearer mental picture of the Liberty and Discovery mech. **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** I think it's green.

AUSTIN: Ooh. I like that.

JACK: [crosstalk] Because of the— Because of the wood— I've always been picturing it as— Were you picturing it as a color? **[AUSTIN: No.]** Just as a metal?

AUSTIN: Yeah, but I like green a lot.

JACK: I think it's green. **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** I think it's... I'm trying to... We talked about it beforehand as being almost like the, um... in *Aliens*. **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** What do you call it— The loader. The thing. **[AUSTIN: Yeah.]** And I don't know whether or not it's that? That doesn't really have a head.

AUSTIN: It doesn't matter, Jack. **[JACK: No?]** I need four more Disappointment tokens. And you were at six. That was your sixth.

[tokens rattling]

AUSTIN: That was your sixth... [**JACK:** Yes.] tower level [**JACK:** Yeah.] so I'm gonna need four more. [**JACK:** Why?] For the Joker. For the firing. [**JACK:** Yep.] For the Adversary firing.

[more rattling]

JACK: Yeah. Yeah, and so I guess the answer to "where does it sit" is it doesn't.

AUSTIN: You put it on.

JACK: Yeah, but it doesn't— It doesn't sit as neatly as it would on a head.

AUSTIN: No.

[even more rattling]

JACK: It's sloppy, and it goes over... Poppycock it, I'm gonna have to [chuckles] tip these out into my hand, and it's just great.

AUSTIN: I just need two more.

JACK: Yeah, I know.

[tokens finally hitting the table]

AUSTIN: I have 10 Disappointment tokens.

JACK: Oh, my god! [realization] Oh, no! Oh, no.

AUSTIN: So here's the way Disappointment tokens work. [**JACK** laughs] I'll go over what all of the abilities are, for the people who listen.

JACK: Oh, no! [laughs]

AUSTIN: So, you can spend five Dogma to make a Divine—

JACK: [crosstalk] This has never happened before!

AUSTIN: —to make the Divine choose a card from their hand that they shuffle back into their deck. We talked about that one. You can spend five Interpretation to "consult the texts", and, kind of, look for a loophole in what you know about your Divine, and what you get to do there is you get to look in your discard pile— [**JACK:** Yeah.] the Pilgrim does, and gets to replay a discarded card...

JACK: [crosstalk] [pained] That's what you get to do.

AUSTIN: [crosstalk] ...from... from the game. At five Disappointment, the Divine can trash the Pilgrim's hand. [**JACK:** Mhm!] The Pilgrim can then redraw back up. It's a little slap on the wrist.

JACK: [crosstalk] What could be worse? Than trashing their hand?

AUSTIN: I dunno. At 10 Disappointment tokens, the Divine can destroy any number of relics they want, with the exception of one.

You're putting it on the hand— or, the head of Liberty and Discovery, and its boosters come on. **[JACK groans and chuckles]** It reaches back and draws the saw blade out, and it puts it on you and pushes **[JACK: Oh, no!]** like someone brushing a gnat off their neck. **[JACK: Oh, no...]** And it lifts into the air, as if the whole ground was that magnetic stuff from before, And the wreath falls, and you fall, and you're left with the wreath, and nothing else.

JACK: [laughs] Hey! Don't I get to pick the thing?

AUSTIN: No.

JACK: So I'm just... Am I alive?

AUSTIN: You're in the woods. And Liberty and Discovery learns it doesn't need or want a Candidate anymore. **[JACK laughs and claps]** And that's our sixth...

JACK: That's the sixth!

AUSTIN: And that's the game. So now we get to talk about the ending.

JACK: Oh, which is gonna be really bad as well, for Chital!

AUSTIN: It is.

[03:00:47] End Conditions

AUSTIN (cont'd): Alright. End Conditions. You add up how many points were earned, all said. So I had 10 Disappointment. **[JACK: Yeah!]** What's your— What's your highest?

JACK: [crosstalk] I got one, two, three, four, six, seven, eight, nine Dogma **[AUSTIN: Augh.]** and five Interpretation.

AUSTIN: Okay, so, if Dogma is the highest, the Divine narrates **[JACK: Yeah!]** then the Pilgrim, then the Divine narrates. **[JACK: Mhm.]** If Interpretation is highest, the Pilgrim narrates, then the Divine narrates, then the Pilgrim narrates. If Disappointment is highest, the Pilgrim narrates, then the Divine narrates, then the game ends. So. What happens to Jim-7?

JACK: Lying on his back in the forest, Jim-7 can see three things. He can see the receding shape of the Divine of Liberty and Discovery, and the purple— lilac-purple of its boosters as it lifts itself up into the sky. He can see the dark silhouette of Rigour, no more than a blotting out of the

stars, on the other side of the mountain. And he can see the stars themselves. And as the life leaves him, very slowly, all he can find himself thinking is—

(as Jim-7): This was a small world. This was a quiet world. It needs bigger things than this.

JACK: And then he dies.

AUSTIN: Liberty and Discovery lift further and further, until they are also a star in the sky, and they link up with something in orbit. A backup plan. A camera in the sky that's recorded it all, that shows what Rigour really is. And that footage moves from this system to another, and then another. And they call out his name on those planets. They say—

[music plays: "The Tower, As Built By The Divine Candidate Chital" by Jack de Quidt]

AUSTIN (as They): Chital sacrificed himself. What a hero. He tried so hard to save those people.

AUSTIN: And Liberty and Discovery doesn't correct them, but it never asks for another pilot, either. One day, on another planet— a planet of jazz, a planet of fish, a planet of warm nights— Righteousness leaves. It does need a person. It does need flesh. Because it is not content with exploring the world. It is not content with moving freely. It insists, to its partners, that others must move freely, too.

And so it takes them, a group of them, across the stars to a new home. The group call themselves the Diaspora. And Liberty and Discovery follows them, because staying here is too painful.

[music plays, uninterrupted, until it slowly fades away]

AUSTIN: And that's when it hits. It shoots across the Golden Branch star sector in a divine flash. A broadcast, a crystal-clear message, breaking in past every weather report, and every Nuflesh pop song, and every call home.

It is Ibex, on the podium in Centralia's Memorial Square, surrounded by thousands and thousands of people. He is flanked by guards, but this is not a coup. It is a party, and his words are the toast. A floating camera captures his face from above, but slowly drifts downwards as he talks.

(as Ibex): People of Counterweight, people of the Golden Branch, I am here today to tell you two things. First, your leaders are cowards. In the wreckage of the Golden War, there arose a new war— a silent one. It is fought in the markets and over cocktails. It is fought on proxy battlegrounds and with deniable assets. But because our leaders refuse to fight openly, it is you, the people, who suffer. Elsewhere, people prosper.

AUSTIN: He smirks a private smirk.

(as Ibex): Young Sokrates has reformed a dilapidated empire, and made the hardest of choices, so that its people may again live good lives. But not here. Not on our worlds. Across the sector, there are billions suffering. They suffer on the abandoned worlds of Gemm and Sage. They suffer in the manufacturing hells of Slate and Minerva-12. They suffer on Ionius, where millions move to find work, only to freeze, or vanish, or both. We cannot be sure, because no one knows.

And here on Counterweight, you suffer, too. And they use your suffering as a testbed. As a way to develop new ways to lie, and to control, and to convince you that things are good when they are awful.

AUSTIN: The camera is eye level with him now. Strange lights spark behind him in the sky.

(as Ibex): All of this, because the Divine Grace and her Candidate, Vicuna, are so committed to stability that they cannot see that mere subsistence is not the same thing as living. All of this, because the technocrats of OriCon worry what more open conflict might do to their bottom lines. Listen close. I am not afraid of a little instability, and you are my bottom line.

AUSTIN: There is applause, and below it, some distance away, the voice of Aria Joie blares from a hacked media spot— human, and vulnerable, and excited. A new sound for a revolution that she has no idea that she’s inspiring. The camera moves lower still, and the lights in the sky begin moving. They are lines at first, and then hexagons, the sky itself cut into base geometry. And then the people gasp, and Ibex speaks.

(as Ibex): The second thing I’m here to tell you is that you lead now, not them. And that—

AUSTIN: He points up behind him, and the sky itself reveals something they’d already forgotten— Weight, beautiful, and precious, and perfect, and he says—

(as Ibex): Theirs. That is yours. And we’re going to take it.

AUSTIN: There is applause, and more talking, and more speakers, and Ibex leaves calmly, letting them have this day. He moves to a nearby building, his banners flying from it, an ad-hoc embassy for his new regency.

[music plays: “-.- — ..- .- / .- — .- ... - / -.. .- -.- ...” by Jack de Quidt]

AUSTIN: Ibex slides past his staff, quickly signing this paper, shaking that hand. A well-worn smile. He finds his way to a small room, where a projector streams an empty image onto the wall for a moment, and then another, and then a figure appears.

(as Ibex): Liberty, Discovery? It’s been— I— I—

AUSTIN: Ibex stumbles for words for the first time in months.

(as Ibex): Jerboa... Listen, all said— and there is a lot to be said— it is good to have you back.

AUSTIN: And the Kingdom Come moves closer by the second to September, and in the distance, woven through the black of space, there is another sound. A constant shriek, low, but so insistent that it is nothing but the air, that no one has yet noticed that it is driving them deaf.