

CADENCE

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CADENCE

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To my little brother...well, you aren't very little anymore. Won't be long until you're taller than I am. Then I'll be the shortest one, huh? You're growing up to be an awesome kid. Wasn't too long ago, you were crashing out in my car every afternoon after class; and now you're riding the bus home instead, getting ready for football practice, running around with friends outside, doodling on a level that I only wish I could do...Won't be long now, and you'll be bringing girls home to meet mum, and you better believe we'll be embarrassing the heck out of..I mean, pleasantly introducing ourselves. Anyway, you're still my awesome little brother, even when we're hours apart, and even though you won't be able to read a story that mum knows has this many swear words in it for a long, long time, you'd best not go forgetting how important you are to me anytime soon.

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ABSTRACT

CADENCE

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SUPERVISING PROFESSOR: JON MARC SMITH

Cadence is, quite simply, the first part of a novel of the same name. Of course, as a novel of the fantasy genre, this portion of the novel spends the majority of its time establishing key details such as plot, setting, and cast.

This is especially true with *Cadence*. Because the cast consists of players of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game—or MMORPG—there are a large number of individuals and organizations who take part in getting the various plots—of which a few are begun in part one—from their initiation to their completion.

In Part I, the government of “the country” has been sponsoring a set of virtual gaming worlds as an alternative to life in the real world. This was done in an effort to stem the ever-growing human population and combat rising unemployment and food shortages.

The server on which this particular cast of players...well, play...has begun experiencing a sequence of strange issues—an administrator disappears from the game after admitting the first new player in months, rumors spread of people dying outside of the game after their deaths in-game, and monsters appearing outside of their spawn zones—resulting in considerable conflict between a world that has become accustomed to disciplining its own citizens and handling its own affairs while those in the normal world try to cope with a virtual world that strains against the regulations placed upon it.

1.0 Prelude

Pure chaos, the beauty of a true random design. There were many—especially in the more scientific fields of academics—who dared to refute what was obvious truth. With human interference, there could be no random events, no disorder, no chaos—at least, that was what *they* said. And of course, because it was they who said so, with their doctorates and credentials, the entirety of the mindless drivel of the world believed it, hanging onto every word they said. There were no random decisions, no random actions, no random choices. Everything happened for a reason, for a purpose.

It grew even more tiresome when these supposedly unbiased academists drew their personal beliefs into the discussion. If the best that they could come up with after centuries of practice was that their deity creates the order and the purpose, then they should not have been granted even a minute in front of an audience of fools too inept to think for themselves.

That was the major problem. The people of the world had become too blind in their worship to see that there was little ideological difference between the bare tenets of their beliefs and those of the people they annihilated in the name of their benefactor. Because they were chosen, and because they had purpose. But soon they would see the

reality. The chaos theory would gain the recognition it deserved.

Of course, even now, there was simply too much overabundant faith in the academic communities. Few seemed to know how to think for themselves anymore, and the last few intellectuals had retreated to their respective hiding holes amongst the relative anonymity of the world wide web. Yet even within that supposedly limitless domain, there were few truly safe havens. With the arrival of specifically-designed social-networking sites on the Internet, those few safe-zones had become hard-pressed to survive.

And still, they refused to believe in the concept of chaos. It was a problem, a problem that needed a solution. Luckily for scholars everywhere, Myriad had not only discovered its existence, but had also successfully created the longest running experiment capable of proving the existence of what would soon be known as law, not theory.

Slowly, soft blue light flickered into the room, accompanied by the familiar myriad of whirrs and clicks signaling the machine's return to life. All of this new technology to prevent the sounds of the computers...it was as if they wanted to be surrounded by doomsday devices. Complete silence was too foreign, too unnatural for humans. *The sound of their screams meshed far better with their lifestyle.* The boy frowned at this last thought. Maybe he should sleep a little more. He was starting to creep even himself out.

A cheery voice broke through the noise of the computer and his thoughts, reading the text that had splayed across the monitor. "Please enter your username and password," it requested, presenting a helpful image of a keyboard for the more clueless players. Not bothering to glance at the keys, he typed "M-i-c" and was stretching his right pointer

finger towards the “h” before muttering to himself and replacing the existing letters with “Noroh.” With the requested information relinquished, a brief clip appeared on screen, showing random recordings of previous visits. For most players, this was the highlight of the log-in process, the ability to see glimpses of the events that transpired in their other life. Well, for those not capable of getting that information through other means.

Moments later, a welcome screen appeared, along with the next set of instructions, still in that same pleasantly cheerful voice. "Please ensure that your headset is secure and properly plugged-in," it instructed.

The headset was a new device on the market. Surprisingly cheap, it effectively made virtual reality in the comfort of one's own home affordable to almost anyone—not that just anyone would be skilled enough to play. A confirmation window appeared on-screen, requesting a world code for the desired playing field. Fingers fell to keyboard, and *Cadence* appeared on-screen as a result.

"The playing field you have requested requires an additional player code," prompted the voice. Once the code was given, the program proceeded to scan the computer, presumably for any programs that might alter gameplay and give the player an unfair advantage. There was a reason that *Cadence* was the preferred world of choice for many players. Of course, even being selected to join its lands required an extensive process that could only be initiated by Myriad or her counterpart Kade, two of the primary developers for the overall game itself.

On-screen text informed that the code had been approved, and a warning notice popped up over the next portion of the process. The chair creaked in protest as its occupant settled back, slumping in the chair, not really bothering to read the information,

knowing it had not changed from the last log-in. The boy reached up to rub tired eyes, forgetting the glasses already perched there. They clattered noisily to the linoleum floor, forgotten.

He leaned in now to observe the warning, chuckling. Rumors of death, true death, had begun running rampant through the gossip chains, confirmed by the newscasts of players lapsing into comas that turned out to be fatal. *Cliché, cliché.*

If they had any idea what was really going on, they would be acting more proactively than just hiring some detective. Most of Cadence's players in-game weren't taking the warnings and advisories seriously. While it was true enough that not just anyone could use the moderator's Third Mind ability, which allowed the players to connect their real-life knowledge to the division used by the game, the overall response of the humans had thus far been laughable.

Finding new victims had been even easier than before. Especially since a large majority of the players either did not care enough or could not be bothered to submit to simple steps such as traveling in groups or avoiding nighttime journeys.

Meanwhile, outside of the game, there was panic among practically every fan community that was not centered around the afflicted server. So typical of humankind. An individual might be intelligent, but together, they were mindless sheep. It would not be long now before he was free of the constraints of his borrowed form. But for now, it was almost as entertaining to slowly destroy what Kade and Myriad had worked so hard to establish.

Pathetic imbeciles, assuming they were alone in the multiverse. So alone that they would make such a rookie mistake. Not even the girl who had sealed him onto these

planes had been that naive. No, the humans from her world had finally come together and played their cards somewhat resourcefully. Sending an orphan with no attachments, no surviving family, no livelihood as the sacrifice...it could not have been more brilliant if one of his own kind had machinated the plot.

The timed sequence for the advisory window expired, and the text underneath informed that the code had been approved, as well as a warning that the timed portion of the login process had been initiated.

"The account you have requested requires an additional security code previously selected by the user. You will now have fifteen seconds each to answer the following two randomly-selected questions from the account's bank of security questions," the voice announced. "Please input your answer via the keyboard and press enter when you are finished with each question. Your questions for today are displayed on the screen."

The two that appeared on the monitor today were simple enough. The first question wanted the capital of Cadence for an answer, while the second merely wanted to know the last town that had been visited by the user, according to the video clips displayed earlier.

Again, fingers fell to the keyboard, and the names *Laeru* and *Oraji* appeared in the respective blanks. A quick tap of the enter key and another pause ensued while the answers were verified. At last the voice spoke, this time from the headset.

"Welcome to Cadence. Enjoy your stay."

Fools.

* * *

Myriad turned the corner to her left and drew herself flat against the wall. There was a moment's vertigo from the sudden lack of movement, and she grasped in frustration at the nonexistent ridges in the smooth cement at her back. The longer they stayed in Raen's base; the more risk they were taking. Getting caught may not ruin their investigation into the recent rumors of death on the server, but it would set them back significantly. Not only that, but it also held the potential to raise many red flags that would prevent them from doing the work themselves. Contracting the work out to regular players was far more risky, especially if Raen had been behind the recent incidents.

Frustrated, she tuned into her sister's player essence over the Psyche, hoping she had uncovered something of use, so they could hurry and leave already. It wasn't there. Mildly perturbed, she checked for Dairym's administrator signal over the private administrator's Psyche network they shared with Kade. Just barely, she could feel the faint tingle of her sister's admin beacon broadcasting. That wasn't right. She should have been able to pick up both signals. Since she couldn't, that could only mean one thing—Raen was using an EMP, or prison band, to suppress Dairym's presence.

"And then there were two." Myriad poked at the small orb of warm brown light that hovered in the air just above her right shoulder. Upon her touch, it expanded as Cadence's third administrator, Kade, opened a low-frequency communications channel between the two. Quickly, she passed on her new location and the approximate coordinates she was picking up from Dairym. If push came to shove, Kade would forcefully extract the siblings, irregular interference regulations be damned.

The relay complete, Myriad headed onward. Luckily, the location she had picked

up for Dairym was further on ahead from the hallway she had turned into, some ways past an intersection that lay a short distance away. Sneaking back past her pursuers would have been difficult in the brightly lit halls, where there were no shadows to melt into.

She had almost reached the intersection when a slight scuffle from ahead alerted her to the presence of others. Cursing inwardly at the lack of hiding places in the halls, she opted for pressing her back as flat against the wall as possible. If she had any amount of lucky, they would overlook her and walk on by.

From the left corner of her vision, a pair of guards came into view. Slowly, Myriad moved her right hand to the rapier at her waist, the left hand clenching nervously on nothing.

Completely unperturbed, Kade's orb floated robotically into the crossway, its only goal reaching Dairym's current coordinates. Both guards turned to regard the orb, puzzled at its appearance. It only took them a few seconds longer to think to look in the direction it had come from, but when dealing with Myriad, those were a few seconds too long.

The admin rushed at the smaller of the pair first, assuming him to be a mage from his lack of weapon. As she expected, he began a cast, but unfortunately for him she already had her weapon drawn and at the ready.

To her surprise though, the mage did manage to complete his spell. A blast of fire leapt hungrily through the air between the two, and Myriad had just enough time to swing her blade up in a quick arc, taking advantage of its enchanted blade to absorb the heat of the blast. There was nothing she could do about the force behind the spell though, which sent her crashing back into the wall, landing awkwardly against the corner.

"Damn it Kade," she cursed, forcing herself to her feet. Truthfully, she knew she

should have expected the mage to have used a sketch, or quick-cast, when pressed for too much time to get off a regular spellcast. Any decent mage had several prepped for such occasions. It was easier to blame Kade though. Regaining her feet, she saw that the mage was of course casting again. However, this cast was taking longer than the first; something that she hoped meant that he only had one sketch prepared for battle. The other guard stood by warily, ready to move in and intercept her, she knew, should she move for the caster.

Electricity shot from the mage's hands this time, and Myriad smiled outwardly at his mistake. While with fire she could only absorb the heat and not the force, electricity was an entirely different matter. Standing her ground, she thrust forward with the rapier just as the electrical blast neared her person, sending it rocketing back at the mage. Eyes widening in alarm and confusion, he jerked his arm violently across his body from top down, then sagged to the floor, screaming at the sudden jolt of pain that rocketed his shoulder from the dislocated joint. The force and desperation of the cast served its purpose, however, and a violet-hued shield appeared in front of the mage, launching the spell back at Myriad even faster than she had sent it rocketing back to him.

She winced as it crashed into the exposed corner of the hallway above her, pieces of whatever material had been used in the construction of the fortress's inner walls raining down softly from overhead. Motion from her right caught her attention, and she remembered the other guard, swinging her own blade up to intercept, forcing his to slide along hers in order to catch the full momentum of his blow near the stronger hilt of her own.

The force of the blow absorbed, she pulled back, sensing for the remnants of the

electrical spell that she knew to still be in the surrounding air. Gathering them together, she smirked at the guard as electricity sparked along the length of her blade. He jumped back, startled.

"Elementalist!" he warned his fellow, not that it made any difference. The mage had sunk to the floor in a fit of pain from his sacrificed arm. *And he'd made it into serving as a guard how?*

Shrugging it off, she launched a flurry of strikes on the distracted fighter. The first two he managed to block, but as soon as the third strike landed, they both knew it was over.

For a brief instant, his arm went numb where she had struck; and he knew she had won, as he watched his sword slip from his fingers, leaving him open for each subsequent strike. But before the server disconnected him for the 24-hour waiting period following a loss of life, the guard saw a slight light...one that made him feel remarkably less bitter towards what he considered a stacked death at the hands of an admin.

"Particle tracers," he said aloud, as his avatar began vanishing, and his smile grew all the more at the frightened expression on his opponent's face.

Quickly, she blinked her eyes, silver irises replacing pale blue, so she could see the same he had seen as he had been disconnected. Whispy lines ran as far as she could see. All along the hallway. In both directions.

"Shit!" she shouted, having forgotten the other guard, as the particle tracers began to glow. She turned back the way she had come and could see the telltale glimmer of the floating lines snaking down the parallel hallway, as well. Even if the connecting hallway somehow wasn't destroyed, she still stood a good chance of being injured if she took

refuge there.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, SHIT!" she swore, blinking again to return her vision to normal. Even in the normal plane, the particle tracers were starting to glow. The remaining guard had stopped cringing, having noticed the glowing lines. From the fearful expression on his face, he also knew what they entailed, as he moved to huddle in the connecting hallway she had discounted.

Not bothering to correct his decision, Myriad ran for the far hallway—the one down which she had sensed Dairym—hoping to make it far enough away before anyone set off the tracers' spell. The entire hallway appeared illuminated as if by daylight, from the steadily increasing glow of the tracers. There was a cascading crash from somewhere in the distance. Behind her, she could hear the mage scream. And then, she was airborne.

1.1 Silver Key

It was easy to forget this was just a game. The forests themselves exuded an aura of calm and mystery, overly tall trees reaching high enough—and spreading far enough—to blot out the sky above. Dappled rays of sunlight still managed to filter through here and there, illuminating the vibrant greens of the undergrowth below. All in all, she could easily see why the government had such an easy time convincing people to spend their lives inside virtual worlds like this one instead of in the real world. This was Cadence, the virtual world that Myriad had agreed to register her for in accordance with their deal.

Alerym turned her gaze down the worn path they were traversing, its meandering course winding away into more remote, seemingly unexplored regions of the forest. She wasn't sure how likely that was since Cadence had been around for a few years now, but she assumed they must have some mechanisms in place to keep the world fresh for the players.

To the sides of the main path branched off countless others, testaments to the adventurers who had come before them. Being new to Cadence—in fact, *the* newest...though Myriad had instructed her to keep the knowledge secret—Alerym couldn't help but marvel at the wondrous imitation. It was truly amazing, what

technology was capable of nowadays; that it could place her in the midst of dense nature while she sat at her computer, staring at a seemingly empty screen.

“You would please incline yourself to make a haste?” asked a tall, dark-skinned man who was one of her three fellow adventurers at the moment. She frowned while letting her mind analyze the jumbled words, turning to her escort, Liux, when she still did not understand. The blonde youth shrugged; but the man's female partner, CeCe, groaned loudly and whacked her companion hard across his back.

"Aden, you clod! Either switch your default language to English or speak in Arabic. You're messing up the translator-thingie-majig again!"

Alerym smiled as the two launched into a heated argument about whether or not the translator was a necessary function for gameplay when nearly all of Cadence's players were based in the same country to begin with.

Unlike herself and Liux, everything about the duo was exaggerated, mostly due to CeCe's influence, it seemed. The pair even had a name for themselves—Ecadence—which Aden insisted was a scrambling of their names that they had used long before joining Cadence.

"Why Eldlar?" Liux surprised her by asking, locking his crystal blue eyes with her translucent grey ones. Alerym pushed silver-blue strands of hair back behind her right ear, mulling over an answer to give him.

Supposedly Liux was her escort, assigned by Myriad. At least, that was what he claimed. He even knew that she was new to Cadence. Yet there was something off about him that she could not place. So when she had seen the Ecadence duo planning an excursion into Eldlar, she had taken the opportunity to party with the older players,

hoping to branch out and become less unfamiliar with the game's mechanics and possibly lose a "mentor" who was doing his best to keep her isolated and uninformed at every turn.

* * *

From high above amongst the treetops of the forest, Paradigm could not see the details of her face as she made her response, but he could well imagine it being one of barely contained agitation. This strange pair had been at odds since he had begun shadowing them shortly before they entered the forests, and he had little doubt they had been at cross-purposes long before that.

He smiled to himself as the girl pushed luna-blue strands of hair behind her ear again, the gesture failing since she had already done so a few minutes prior. Yet another lie from the girl, the thief noted. He wondered bemusedly if the other boy had caught on yet to what was a fairly blatant tell.

"He hasn't," a female voice said softly from above and behind, its sudden appearance catching the thief off guard. With a deft hop, he switched directions on the narrow branch, left arm now replacing the right in steadying his precarious perch, right wielding a small knife, eyes searching the forest's lower canopy for the speaker without success.

A second female tittered derisively at his consternation. Paradigm's eyes narrowed as his ears zeroed in on the second voice's location, but he only managed to catch a flash of beige material and lavender braid in the corner of his eye before the taunter had

disappeared among the foliage. "All in good time, all in good time," the now-hidden female added in a placating tone, apparently sensing his irritation. "For now, do keep a close eye on your quarry," she added, reminding the thief of the group he had been watching. Sensing no threat from his fellow treetop guests, despite how uncomfortable they made him, he tuned back in to the ongoing conversation below.

"Fer treasure!" one of the travelers was exclaiming, apparently in answer to the boy's earlier question. Judging from the shock of burgundy hair pulled up into messy pigtails and the axe strapped loosely to her back, Paradigm had assumed she was CeCe, the outlandish female half of the bounty-hunting pair Ecadence.

Though he had never encountered the duo before, his protégé, Xaff, had on numerous occasions. In addition, their interest in bounties instantly put them at odds with the famously disliked thief, who had more than a few on his head.

Luckily for him, there were dossiers of varying detail on every player of the game. Some contained only the bare minimum of information that was provided by the server, while others contained a wealth of information provided by the playerbase themselves—information that was of course differentiated into categories of “fact” and “rumor” by the server. These dossiers had always proved to be an excellent resource to Paradigm for both foes and marks.

So if this girl was CeCe, and she certainly matched the bio photo from the dossier, then rumor held she was an air dualist. A bounty hunter possibly using hacks to overpower their marks? Fact or not, if he had the chance, he would take her out. More than likely, that made the slightly older male Aden, the more ruthless but far less combat dangerous of the pair. He wouldn't be a threat.

"Well?" the blonde-headed boy was asking the blue-headed girl, completely disregarding CeCe. Paradigm knew he had seen the boy before, but could not place his name or allegiance through appearance—there were any number of blonde, blue-eyed boys running around the server.

"Well, why not?" the girl was retorting. Instead of waiting for a response, she hurried to catch up to the other two. Paradigm smirked; glad he wasn't the girl's escort. The kid surely had his work cut out for him. The thief turned his attention back to the misleadingly empty treetops around him. They wanted something of him, and he'd be damned if he didn't come out of this exchange without at least some information.

"Quarry?" He prompted of the empty space.

"Ecadence was hired," the second voice supplied as an answer.

"Quarry?" The thief repeated, spitting out the word distastefully, making his dislike clear to the others. He did not like this terminology these unseen players were using to describe the others below, not so much out of any concern for the players, but more at the implication regarding himself. "If you desire her kept safe, see to the task yourself." A quiet rustle to his left signaled the location and apparent discontent of the original speaker.

"We have not yet been given leave to act," acknowledged the second female, and the thief noted that she sounded frustrated about that fact. This, of course, made no difference to him, but it gave him the edge he was looking for. Paradigm was *not* about to confound his own interests by agreeing to do anything for free, regardless of the mutual benefit gained by keeping this girl alive for information.

"Well then ladies, if you desire this 'quarry' kept safe, hire someone to see to the

task for you."

"We hired *you*," came the simultaneous reply, as a small bag that clinked obviously dropped from above. With a smooth gesture, the thief snatched the bag and tucked it away into his virtual storage, glancing upward as he did so. This time, he caught a brief glance of grey material before the female vanished into the greenery of the forest canopy again.

From far enough away that he knew it to not be the same female who had dropped the coins, the spokesperson for the pair spoke again to advise him that they would provide further payment if they required his services longer than what they had just contracted in payment worth, and then it was silent.

The thief waited until he was positive both females were gone before letting himself frown. Not even his protégé, Xaff, was capable of approaching him so closely without his knowing. One did not become renowned as the most skillful assassin in Cadence through sheer word-of-mouth—there had to be substance behind the rumor.

* * *

Alerym was growing increasingly frustrated with Liux and even more frustrated that she was stuck with him. Consistently with the “do this” and “don't say that.” It had been a struggle just to arrange this party without his consent. Sooner or later though, they had to visit a town, and from there, she was fairly certain she could blend in. She might have no weapon, no skills, and no real knowledge of anything in this world; but how hard could town life be here if they advertised the games as a substitution for the multitude of

problems afflicting the real world?

At any rate, the best thing to do, she decided, would be to consolidate the information that she did know; so that she would be ready to leave when the first opportunity presented itself.

From what she had been told, there had been no new players admitted into Cadence in months, so she would clearly stick out like a kitten in a den of lions if she were to leave his side while in the wilderness. And though she did not mind if others had known she was new, Myriad had warned against letting other players find this out although the admin had not bothered to explain why.

Somewhat distracted by the Myriad/Liux puzzle, she stopped focusing on escape for the moment. None of this situation made any sense to her. Liux claimed that he had been assigned to protect her, but Myriad had never mentioned that she would have an escort in-game.

However, Liux had known many things about her situation, things that he could not possibly have known unless Myriad had spoken with him. Even so, she could not help but feel uneasy in his presence. Thoughts, or rather, fragments of thought, kept flitting across her mind; and even though she could not tell if they belonged to her or them, those bits and pieces were just enough to make her uneasy.

She slowed to a near stop, trying to work out who was the origin. Staring into the distance, she began tuning out the distractions, one by one, as though she were tuning a radio. *Male. They were definitely male.*

Liux took the opportunity to lean in to whisper something in her ear. Still somewhat in her reverie, Alerym tossed her head to shake him away and quickened her

pace in an effort to catch back up with the older players. She already knew the contents of the lecture Liux was going to unleash the first chance that he got, and she was more than tired of hearing it already. *Not everyone is as they seem.* Yeah, she had got that the first eighty times he had said it.

"Will you stop and listen to me?" She turned to face her escort, but continued walking. Although it was very clearly not a question, still she responded with a shake of her head and a succinct, but emphatic, "no" which was further encouraged by CeCe's hollering back to the pair.

"Ey, now, 'urry it up!" When Alerym turned back to the duo, she noticed Aden watching them closely. He was obviously thinking about something, and rather seriously, but whatever it was had been locked away behind his stony features. Footsteps from behind her told her Liux was following as well, and for the first time, she found some comfort in his presence as she walked towards the bounty hunters.

For some time, the four of them walked together in silence, aside from CeCe's frequent humming of various tunes that Alerym had never heard before.

"We have *got* to go back there!" she exclaimed suddenly, startling both of the younger travelers.

"Where, CeCe?" the man asked, although his tone made it painfully obvious that he was still more concerned with his own thoughts as opposed to wherever it was his partner wanted to revisit.

Undaunted, she continued, "Why to good ol' Kanto, ye silly fool, where else?"

In exasperation, Aden glanced up at the sky, or, what would have been the sky, had it not been blotted out by the leafy boughs above. Ignoring her partner's obvious

disdain, CeCe resumed her humming, a melodic sound that Alerym found quite pleasing to the ear.

"I e'er tell ya I wanted to be a singer 'round 'ere?" she said, glancing off dreamily into the more heavily-wooded areas beyond the path, clearly seeing things the rest of them did not. Aden snorted.

"CeCe, you idiot. You just met these kids about half an hour ago! Of course you haven't told them that!"

"Weeell, ya don' gotta be such a jerk 'bout it," she commented, a touch of hurt creeping into her voice, "I'm just gettin' to know 'em a wee bit." The man sighed, one obviously full of impatience, then turned to the red-head, sheathing his rapier.

"I don't know how many times I am having to tell you..." he began, and before Alerym even realized what was occurring, he had shoved Liux off the path into the overgrowth and had one of her arms twisted up and behind her back. "...not for to be playing with your food before you are eating it!" Frozen in shock, she realized she'd missed any chance to safely break away as the bounty hunter flashed a knife in his free hand.

"Aden!" the red-head exclaimed in consternation, although she made no move to stop her partner.

"It's her, CeCe!" Aden shouted, excitement ringing clear in his voice. "It's just as we were instructed, 'Silver passeth through the trees; strands of Luna, hidden key.'"

"But Aden, she ain't got no keys, and she wouldnt've even been passing through these trees if it hadn't been for us askin' 'em to come!"

"Yes, this I am to be well aware of, dearest CeCe," the man admitted. "But you

will tell me this: if she is not to be the one we were sent to find, then why, when we entered these woods, *this* appeared around her neck!" he exclaimed, using the knife to lift forward a fluid silver chain from Alerym's neck for the other two to see. At the bottom dangled a tiny black crescent-shaped ornament.

"That! That wasn't there before!" Liux exclaimed, having struggled back onto the path and drawn his sword.

"Fool, you were not listening? I just said about that!" the man shouted in annoyance. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Alerym noted that his grammar was still off, though her attention was quickly drawn back to Aden's knife, and Liux, who had just drawn his blade. Aden grimaced in annoyance at the boy. "Your friend is coming with us to meet with Raen."

"Raen?" Liux said, and Alerym noticed that not only did he recognize the name, but it also had him obviously startled, as he moved warily forward, "But I was—" the rest of his sentence was cut off as electricity sprung from the air near Aden's knife hand and slammed into the boy, knocking him into a nearby tree trunk.

"You are not to be following."

Liux regained his feet easily, only just in time to be struck by another blast of power. Aden laughed in obvious glee at Liux's struggled attempts to regain his footing. Alerym looked to CeCe, who had remained motionless, neither lending a hand to Aden, nor moving to help Liux or herself.

In frustration, Alerym tried to pull away from the man, but the knife quickly put a stop to those thoughts, a thin line of red dripping from the intersection of metal and flesh. It was certainly much harder to be valiant than she had thought it would be, courtesy of

the game's pain rendering. This must have been what Myriad had advised her of when she had explained that the game would be constantly feeding electrical signals to the brain, just on a reduced scale for injuries. *If that was reduced, I don't think I want to experience that in reality.*

As if in response to her own reaction, Aden howled in pain; and CeCe finally moved to draw her axe. As she did so, she cried out herself, staring in surprise at the small, dartlike knife piercing her hand. Not daring to move again just yet, Alerym glanced down at the hand wielding the knife in time to see another, nearly identical blade pierce into the adult's skin next to the first one. A sickly green liquid oozed from the wound now, and Aden's hand suddenly throbbed and convulsed, dropping the knife.

Seizing her chance, the girl slammed her foot into Aden's own and forced her muscles to relax and untense. Unable to support her sudden weight with the awkward position he was holding her confined arm in, Aden let go, and Alerym fell to the ground. A short distance away, Liux was standing his ground, albeit shakily, and she stumbled towards him. Aden lurched forward after her, catching her shirt, and the two fell to the ground. Behind her, Aden began casting a proper spell. Frantic, she twisted around in time to see another knife pierce the man's shoulder. Aden's spell was interrupted with a curse as another strange substance that wasn't blood—this time purple—dripped from the dartlike knife.

CeCe moved to support Aden as thin clouds of mist filled the area from Aden's partially finished spell. Not wanting to chance one of them pulling her into the mist with them, Alerym scurried behind Liux, who was watching the misty zone warily.

"Sorry," the two heard CeCe's voice say. A few moments later the mist faded to

reveal the two of them standing alone in the forest. Further along the path, light flashed brightly enough to blind the pair, followed by several gusts of strong wind that threatened to knock the still-shaken Alerym from her feet. Eventually, the freak occurrence died down, leaving the pair apparently alone in the middle of the forest.

"So you would be her then?" a voice commented from behind them. Liux whirled around, sword still bared, pulling Alerym around behind him; but there was no one else in the woods around them that she could see.

"Might I offer the feeble suggestion of looking up," the voice commented sarcastically, amused at Liux's consternation. Following the advice, Alerym noticed a male who appeared somewhere between Aden and CeCe in terms of age. He was sprawled casually on one of the lower branches of the tree that Liux had been thrown against only moments before. "Young ones like you, you always manage to get yourselves into nothing but trouble," he added, a wry smirk tugging at the left corner of his mouth. Combined with a shock of crimson hair and like-colored eyes, the expression gave him the look of a madman, as far as she was concerned. Then again, he had helped them.

"Pardon me," she spoke up, shrugging past a stunned Liux to get a better look at the person in the tree. Maybe it was just the lighting that made him look like a maniac. She certainly hoped so; if so, he could very well be her ticket away from Liux. "But might we have your name...as you did help us when we needed it...and as you appear to know who we are already."

The other laughed aloud, a harsh sound that spoke of a blatant disregard for society's rules, prompting the girl to duck back behind her more capable companion.

Maybe Liux wasn't so bad after all. He was still the one with the sword, at least. The newcomer leaned forward from the tree, and it seemed certain he would fall at any moment. Yet somehow, he did not.

"My lady, you give me more credit than I deserve. I profess that I do indeed know who you are, but as to your names, I am as ignorant of that fact as you are of my own. Although, I am interested to learn how those lovely friends of yours had already become aware..." Hopping down out of the tree, he extended a hand first to her, and then to Liux, who looked away haughtily without taking it. "I believe that most of this world's inhabitants refer to me as Paradigm, which suits me well enough. Now as for the two of you?"

To Alerym's surprise, Liux pulled her back.

"I thought you looked familiar!" he exclaimed vehemently, to Alerym's complete unsurprise. He'd done this before with nearly everyone else who had tried to group with them. From "safely" behind Liux's back, she rolled her eyes at Paradigm. "Keep away from that one! He's bad news," her escort added. For his part, Paradigm adopted a comically bad wounded expression, and Alerym struggled not to laugh.

"But I say, sir, I believe that I just saved you and your lady friend. Is that truly a proper way of expressing gratitude?" Liux scowled in response, moving backwards and effectively pushing Alerym further back and away. But encouraged by the aggravated attitude displayed by her "partner," and the easy-going friendliness displayed by their rescuer, Alerym shouldered around the boy before he could stop her.

"Please pardon him. He doesn't seem to know anything more than rudeness, it would seem. I am Alerym, and he is Liux."

"It would seem'?" The stranger turned the words over aloud, clearly picking apart the wording and turning the causal phrase into a sardonic query. "'It would seem.' 'It would seem.' 'It would seem.' He is your partner, yet you know so little of his character?" Liux groaned, shooting her a very annoyed "now see what you've done" look, not realizing that she really didn't care. "Though I must say that you two are rather lucky," Paradigm said abruptly, changing the topic. "In truth I had not intended to stop here, as I was on my way to Laeru, when my warp spell somehow...uh...ruptured. The bloody things have become a smidgeon unreliable these days. To where were you headed, if I may ask?"

"Lucky indeed," she echoed, "as in truth, we do not have any particular destination in mind."

"Actually," Liux intervened, "we were on our way to meet with a friend of mine who has been waiting to meet Alerym for some time now."

"Truthfully, this is the first my *acquaintance* has mentioned of meeting with any friends of his, so it must not be terribly urgent, and we would very much appreciate if we might travel in the company of someone as capable as yourself for a time." Of course, she left off the tidbit of maybe ditching Liux and replacing him with the older boy.

"Normally, I would have to decline such a request," Paradigm admitted, turning to face away from the couple, as though to consider her request. Taking advantage of his turned back, Liux nudged his companion sharply, but she merely waved at him dismissively. After a moment or so, the newcomer turned back to face the pair. "I must admit; I *am* curious to know why Myriad admitted you into Cadence before leaving."

Alerym started. How had he known about that? Myriad had told her not to tell a

soul about what the moderator had done, yet here was someone—another person who was not Liux—who knew exactly who she was and when she had come into the game. Paradigm grinned what was apparently his signature grin again at her expression.

Alerym found that even more curious. Not only did he know about it, but he also knew that it was supposed to be such a well-kept secret that only three souls in the game should know, of which, he was not one. Yet that begged the question—if he knew, then maybe it was more common knowledge than she had been led to believe, and maybe she would find herself able to rid herself of an individual who she was quickly beginning to suspect had not been appointed to travel with her, at the very least, not by Myriad. And surely the best chance she'd have of doing so would be in the capital city of Cadence.

Paradigm walked off in the same direction as the flashing lights that had signaled Ecadence's departure not so long before, turning to motion for them to follow. Alerym quickly hurried to catch up, leaving a bitter and annoyed Liux to trail along behind.

1.2 Protesting Protests

The room in which Alerym found herself was nearly empty, containing nothing more than the portals themselves and a shelf of the supplies needed to activate one, consistent with what had been at the portal in the forest. Unlike the one portal there, however, there were three portals in this room.

"Why so many portals?" she asked, using her foot to poke at the engraved crevice in the floor that signified the outer ring of one of the three portals. Liux groaned, but Paradigm grinned.

"You wouldn't expect it to look at him, but Oeil gets a lot of business. There's another room across the hall with three more of these." Alerym nodded and half-listened as he continued explaining more about the different types of portals and their possible destinations, looking around at the rest of the room.

Like the floor and ceiling, the walls were formed of the same hard-packed earth, in a style that was reminiscent of adobe structures in the real world. She also noticed the room was uncomfortably warm, with only one solitary window permitting any airflow in and out of the room. Once she had crossed the room to look through it, however, she quickly understood why there was only the one window. As far as she could see, there

was nothing but sand and more sand, stretching into the horizon. Below her, people and animals thronged about a crowded street, and the smells and sounds of a bustling city floated up to meet her. She turned to look for the door, suddenly feeling an urge to get out onto the streets and explore and was not too surprised to find Paradigm grinning and Liux scowling yet again.

"Welcome to Laeru, capital of Cadence," the redhead announced, crossing to the doorway and thrusting aside the hanging curtain that replaced its wooden counterpart with a grand flourish. Alerym peeked outside the room. The hallway beyond was more worn than the room she was in, with multiple cracks showing in the earthen walls. Three more openings were scattered along the hallway, beaded curtains hanging in their doorways. A pale blue glow shimmered in two of the three.

"Privacy spells," Paradigm explained to Alerym's puzzled expression. Liux groaned, but Alerym merely nodded her head. Her "partner" was really beginning to test her patience. *What is he up to? Why is he here?* The thoughts popped into her mind, unbidden. She started, unsure again as to where they had come from, yet becoming more certain than before that they were coming from Liux.

Confused and in a daze, she looked over to the boy, only to find herself suddenly staring intently at Paradigm, who was...looking directly at her and explaining how the privacy spells allowed the curtains to enable a soundproof and private environment far more effectively than a regular door could. *But this is impossible! How can I be viewing myself!?* In a panic, Alerym rapidly blinked her eyes, feeling immense relief as her proper ocular perspective returned.

When she stole another glance at Paradigm, fearful of any more vision swappings,

she noticed he had already shifted his gaze to Liux. Impassive and unreadable, and obviously unnerving the other. *Does he know our plans for her? Did Myriad somehow contact him before we killed her?* Alerym started, and then quickly attempted to regain composure.

In all fairness, she could not be sure if she was picking up either of their thoughts or if this was some gameplay mechanic she was unfamiliar with. At the same time though, if they were coming from one of the two boys, they most likely came from Liux, as they felt similar to the thoughts she had been hearing in the forest. Either way, taking the chance of staying with someone who might have killed the moderator was a definite risk since they were clearly not her ally. That much was evident.

Fiddling with the beads on the curtain, she pretended to continue examining her new surroundings, taking advantage of Paradigm and Liux's stare-down. While she liked Paradigm and doubted he was involved, she wasn't sure she could afford to take the risk right now.

Turning her head to look down the rest of the hallway, she caught sight of two girls walking towards her from the other end, one leaning heavily on the other as they climbed the stairs. The smaller of the two—who was somehow supporting the larger girl's frame despite her diminutive size—was slight of build with silver hair and crystal blue eyes that emphasized her pale skin. Her friend—who was clearly drunk—seemed like a burst of color at her side, sporting short, brightly golden hair and like-colored eyes.

"Ni-Ni-niche, you...you're my b-b-best..." the drunk girl was saying, but trailed off, having noticed Alerym. "Look!" she guffawed, pointing. "It's one o'dem people like you!" Her friend glanced to where she was pointing and stiffened upon noticing the girl.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Zen," she responded. "I have nothing in common with that fool."

Confused, Alerym watched them continue on, surprised by the pale girl's reaction. Or rather, more surprised by the pale girl's recognition than the reaction. Behind her Paradigm and Liux had begun arguing, loudly. With sudden glee she noted that neither of the two were paying her any attention at all and took that as her cue to slip through the curtain, heading for the stairs from where the two girls had come up. Having gained them, she hurried down them as quickly as she dared without risking falling, determined to put as much distance between her and the two back in the room before they noticed her departure.

The room she found at the bottom of the stairs was both amazingly large and thoroughly packed. Several patrons turned her way, and she was suddenly conscious of how very strange her haste must look in comparison to the laid back attitude of everyone else idling around the tavern.

Trying to avoid making eye contact, she hurried towards the door, each step feeling as though it took eternity to make, and still feeling the curious eyes of several watching her. Pushing through the heavy wooded door, she found that relief flooded her as quickly as the first rays of sunlight could find her skin.

Though she had thought the pub was crowded before, it was nothing compared to the crowded street she found herself in now. All around her was the hustle and bustle of a major city, just like the one she had lived in at home. Not really caring where she was headed and feeling deceptively safe lost among the crowds, Alerym started walking, marveling at just how populated the city was for a game.

Along the sides of the street were many stalls set up with what she assumed were the usual street vendors. Towards the end of the street she was on, she noticed a small gathering of people milling about aimlessly, dressed in exotic costumes, bodyguards standing by like statues. Beyond them, a much larger throng of people were pacing to and fro in a large circular open space. Curious, she approached to see what was going on.

"How are we supposed to set up the stage with those idiots doing their protest?" she heard a girl exclaim in annoyance as she got closer. Alerym marveled at her costume. Like many of the others, she was dressed in a particular color. Except, while the others had varied features and shades in their outfits, this girl's was amazingly detailed despite the simplicity that she had employed.

Everything was the same shade of violet—her short-cropped hair, her dress...only her eyes differed in that they were a fair lilac shade. The sole variation to the color scheme was the pair of spotless white gloves that stood out in contrast to her perfectly bronzed skin.

"Let the fools be fools, Mia," her companion giggled, ineffectively pushing back one of the lavender braids that was already held in place by her headband. Other than hair and eye color, the pair were identical in features, except that unlike the others milling about in the vicinity, the lavender-haired girl was dressed plainly in a simple beige tunic and white leggings. Based from this, Alerym concluded she probably was not a part of the performing troupe waiting in the area. "Kade will remove them quickly enough," the girl with the braid added.

"Tch, buuuut Lia, we could get rid of them waaaay faster between the two of us," the one called Mia pouted. Her friend was already shaking her head.

"You should've thought about stuff like this before we went through all that rigamarole to be Enforcers then. We can't do anything with a protest when we'd stand to profit by getting rid of it. Besides, ultimately, they can't really accomplish anything other than to be a nuisance. Let Kade remove it. He's the moderator; it's his job."

"Fah, Nikil was the smart one, staying Virai. Where is she, anyway? She could take out a good portion of them herself! And you know Cless would be right in there, too. They're so cute together!"

"You *know* she hates it when you encourage him like that Miaaa!" her friend shrieked, rolling her eyes and shoving the costumed girl playfully, earning herself a warning look from the bodyguards.

Alerym smiled. Maybe she could find some other players like these to hang around. Players whose conspiracies and thoughts were targeted on social matters, not on murder or thieving like those that Paradigm and Liux entertained. As if on cue, a loud shriek split the air, as though someone had released a large amount of hot air too quickly.

"Get down!" someone screamed from behind her, forcing her to comply before she could react. Small sparks of fire arced over her head and into the crowd of protestors. The shouts that followed were a mix—some of pain and some of anger—as what appeared to be fireworks exploded in and among the crowd.

"Ooo look, look Mia!" the girl not in a costume was hopping up and down, pointing in excitement towards the crowd of protestors, some of whom were still standing and looking about confused; but many of whom were strewn about the ground, writhing in agony. Turning to see where the spell had come from, Alerym saw two younger boys standing rather conspicuously in the middle of the street, one of them doubled over in

what she first thought was pain, but quickly realized was laughter. His friend, whose hair was only slightly darker than Mia's, was casting again.

"Well, what luck is that!" Mia laughed, "Who'd have thought those idiots would ever manage to do something useful. A toast to Virai and its thrill-seeking independents!"

"You know...*We are* obligated to arrest them," her friend chided, but amusement danced clearly on her face, and she made no move toward the boys.

"Oh, no, no, no, my dear, I don't believe we are. Remember, we're not supposed to interfere if we stand to profit. Besides, they're exaggerating. He's not even using real magic. Couldn't you tell?"

Feeling much better now that she had finally witnessed players who were not mysteriously aware of her supposedly secret presence in the game, Alerym continued on her walk, humming to herself, not noticing the intrigued looks the other two girls sent her way or their hurried departure as soon as she had passed from view.

* * *

Xaff looked to his companion, unsure what exactly to make of the large throng of people gathered in the pavilion area. But to the young thief's dismay, the mage looked every bit as confused as he himself was. Though with Jairo's recent playing history, he supposed it was to be expected.

"Gone two months and everything goes to Hell," Jairo said. "Was it like this last time you came to this dust bowl?" he asked, gesturing about with a flourish to the desert city. His friend shook his head.

"I would ask, but these guys look more like a mob than a bunch of tourists." He smirked, then added in a louder voice, "And the festival dancers are way hotter."

A few of those on the fringe of the crowd stopped and glared at the two boys before going back to their march. Even though Laeru was the capital of Cadence, traffic throughout the city generally tended to exist—or rather, not exist—on a relatively lower tier than that of most of the other cities. Seeing as it was located in the Handarashi Desert which was well known throughout Cadence for its barren, inhospitable landscape and crazed monsters, few players bothered to venture out that far; and those who did make the trip usually only did so for important business...or if they were on the run.

"So..." Jairo prompted, "Paradigm, Medea, or Kade and Myriad?"

Xaff considered the question carefully. After all, as a thief, information was his livelihood, and he hadn't heard anything that should have stirred up a group of protesters this quickly. So while it was always possible that someone else could have riled up a mob of this size, the probability of the culprit being one of those four far surpassed that of any other likelihood.

Paradigm, who was Xaff's mentor in the thieving trade, was one of the most intriguing characters the young thief had ever met. He would turn you down for a job because the coin was "too silver," then accept a job from your rival paying in copper. And not for any personal dislike, but just because he found it to be more "entertaining" at the time.

And as ill-liked as he was by the majority of the population—to the extent he had been unofficially voted "Cadence's Resident Asshole" by the Enforcers—many of the independent Virai saw him as a folk-hero of sorts, a crusader against the law. It helped

that he was also well-known for being one of the best strategists to join the playing fields, as even his enemies—of which there were many—had to admit, albeit grudgingly. There had also been more recorded assassination attempts on the assassin than on any other player save for Medea—who was close enough in attempted hits that no one was ever quite sure who had been targeted more.

Medea, on the other hand, was a bitch, plain and simple. Xaff honestly could not find a better description for her than that. Even more hated than Paradigm and far more ruthless, Medea's cruelty reigned unrivaled. Whereas Paradigm infuriated players with his arrogance and his inconsistency in taking work, Medea would take any job as long as the pay was high enough. The result had been that the Enforcers ensured she remain well-paid, making her even more frustrating to the normal player population. Yet in the same vein as the enigmatic rogue, Medea also held her own circle of followers—if not friends—though of course, most of them were fellow enforcers.

The extreme opposite of Paradigm and Medea were Kade and Myriad, two of the developers for the overall game itself. With many of the other online games, the developers pretty much washed their hands of a game once it left the shelves, excluding perhaps a few hodgepodge releases of content for the first few years following its release. Kade and Myriad, however, had remained active within the community, ensuring that Cadence stayed popular with its fan base through continued content releases and easy support access.

Because of this, Kade and Myriad were also the official government for Cadence. Like any other form of government, the decisions they made tended to please some and anger many. A lot of this was due, perhaps, to the fluidity of their position. It was far

from entirely impossible for a coup to occur, but enough of the population was pleased with the balance that the duo maintained to bother vying for a position of power.

That was perhaps the best thing that they had accomplished, or so Xaff believed. Keeping Cadence balanced while most of the other servers leaned towards one extreme or the other was no easy task. Although it was probably easier than it was for the other player-run worlds, which had no power to select the individuals who would join their community.

Unlike those other servers, Cadence had maintained a steady rate of population growth, without overwhelming its resources or being overrun by either the self-proclaimed "do-gooders" or by one of many virtual crime syndicates. The players selected for Cadence could live how they pleased, choose how to align themselves—if at all—with one of the various allegiances throughout the land, and not have to worry about watching their back every time they logged into the server. Obviously, Cadence itself was politically against crime and other negative extremes, although the reality was more of a neutral ambivalence that led everything to even out in the end.

"Well?" the mage prompted. The thief knew that his friend had likely already formed his own conclusions about the mob, probably the same ones he himself had just arrived at...they thought too much alike, which was probably the only reason they could tolerate each other.

Both Jairo and Xaff had been accepted into Cadence at close to the same time and had struck up a temporary alliance with each other when they were ambushed by some players out preying on the newbies. Over the past year, that alliance for survival had evolved into a fast friendship. Xaff had to admit, he was glad to see Jairo again. It had

been a long two months.

"Oh come, on already!" Jairo exclaimed, crossing his arms. "You've been around more than I have lately. Surely you've got some idea."

"Well," Xaff began, realizing that his musings were beginning to try his friend's patience—patience which had been remarkably non-existent for as long as he'd known him—"the crowd size is about right for Medea, but the location is a bit off. She never comes out this far. Kade and Myriad could not possibly make a decision THAT infuriating to anyone. Not to mention that, under general circumstances, Paradigm's been finding more convenient locations in which to work his mischief."

"You're saying it's not any of them?" Jairo questioned, obviously hesitant of his friend's judgment of the situation. "Who else could raise a crowd of this magnitude?"

Xaff couldn't resist a little jab at his friend's situation. "You did abandon us for two whole, long months, in case you've already forgotten," he said, laughing. "But what I really want to know, is what the hell Paradigm managed to pull that could prompt Kade and Myriad to take action."

The mage nodded, and Xaff knew that the underlying point to his statement had served its purpose. The two friends turned to watch the crowd again. Most of the various allegiances weren't devoted enough to cross the treacherous desert for the mere purpose of driving home a point, leading him to believe that the crowd was mostly comprised of various members of the do-gooder factions.

He could not help but wonder how many people had been injured in the press of this crowd of self-proclaimed "generous, well-meaning protectors of Cadence" or whatever their group motto had changed to this time around. The irony of it apparently

occurred to Jairo as well, who had begun to laugh. Xaff joined in, prompting a few annoyed looks from those on the fringes of the group.

"Y'know I think things might be a bit more festive around here if we could help get rid of these fools" Xaff mused. "You can hardly even tell that there *is* a festival coming up soon." Jairo looked to his friend, finding himself enthusiastically agreeing before he had even considered the possible ramifications.

"I find no fault in your logic," he agreed, turning slightly so that he now directly faced the gathered throng of protestors. Taking the cue, Xaff stood facing him, creating the appearance that the two friends were still merely having a regular conversation in the streets while, in reality, the thief was casing the area around them for Enforcers. He noticed two right off the bat—a performer and a civilian—but they appeared fairly annoyed at the protest as well. As expected for Laeru, he also noticed plenty of his fellow independents—the Virai—and took heart in knowing that they'd help delay any pursuit.

Crossing his fingers as fire appeared in the air just past his friend's fingertips, Xaff still hoped the two Enforcers he'd seen would take Jairo's fireworks in stride since, after all, they were at least doing the performer a favor. He really didn't want two Zodiacs after him just for a little good-natured fun.

After all, if anyone got hurt, it was their own fault. Xaff had already recognized the spell Jairo was casting; it was little more than an illusion. Anyone hurt by that shouldn't even be present in the city in the first place. The flames at the end of Jairo's fingers began sparking, and Xaff ducked to the side just as the mage completed the cast and uttered the sketch that would complete the launch.

The ball of "fire" that had been gathering shot off, splitting into a multitude of

smaller, more harmless flames that arced over the crowd accompanied by a sound akin to that of steam escaping, shrill and panic-inducing. As quickly as they had shot off, the flames dissipated, causing a multitude of minor explosions in the air over the protestors' heads. The gathered crowd began trampling over each other in their panic to ensure that they were not in the line of fire. *Humans were so predictable*, Xaff thought with amusement as he doubled over in laughter at the results.

Next to him Jairo was casting again. Xaff stole a quick look at the Enforcers and was relieved to see that they were taking the entire situation in stride. Catching movement from the corner of his eye, he turned back towards the crowd. One of the protestors close to the fringe who had somehow managed to dodge the flames rushed Jairo, attempting to take advantage of the mage's inability to defend himself and complete the cast at the same time. The thief pulled a small knife from the sheath hidden in his sleeve, positioning himself into a slight crouch that would enable him to move quickly in whatever direction was required. He did not want to chance jumping into one of his friend's spells, at any rate.

Just as he was about to tackle the man, the protestor stopped, staring down at his arm. Blood was mingled with an odd inky purple substance that oozed where the blood flowed. His face paled considerably, and he hurried back into the crowd, no doubt seeking a cleric. Xaff did an about turn and saluted the empty rooftops behind him, much to the surprise of the spectators, and derived some amusement from the name passed from person to person in the streets until its repetition made it audible: Paradigm.

"He keeps doing shit like that, and it'll take forever before they start chanting my name," he muttered in mild annoyance to his friend. Jairo grinned as he let loose his

second cast and admired his handiwork. As a former enforcer, Zadex probably wouldn't be too pleased about this turn of events, but it was exactly this type of thing he had missed about Cadence. It was good to be back.

1.3 Running Interference

After the excitement in the pavilion area, Alerym had wandered the city, finding herself becoming even more lost in the panic that ensued. Some of the scattered thoughts she had picked up had led her to realize that more than a few of the people panicking had only been faking in order to give the boys space to escape without getting caught. Neither Lia nor Mia had moved to arrest them though.

She walked down yet another street, knowing it looked familiar, but unable to place it from all the other dry, dusty, desert streets she'd seen this afternoon. She was quickly learning that time appeared to pass by much faster in-game than it did in the real world, though she was certain there was still a ways to go before it began to grow dark. Even still, the hot sun was uncomfortably dry, and it was beginning to make her skin feel painfully warm. Noticing the cool of an alley, she ducked in, hoping Laeru was safer than such similar-sized cities in the real world. Gratefully, she quickened her step as the slightly cooler air caressed her skin.

"Excuse me, are you lost?" Having closed her eyes to let them adjust to the change in lighting, Alerym was startled to find herself being addressed. Hastily, she brushed strands of luna hair from her slender face to get a better look at the girl in the

alley. *Had she been there the whole time?* The girl was standing, or rather, leaning against the cool adobe brick, an amused expression that reminded Alerym of Paradigm sprawled cozily across her face. Long black strands were pulled back with a light blue ribbon. Coal black eyes watched her, an unusual jet shade that filled both the irises and pupils. The gray sweatshirt with fingerless gloves at the ends did not set her mind any more at ease considering the heat of the desert.

"N-no," she stammered, instantly distrustful of the other's eyes and dress.

"So you're aware this alley dead-ends, then, hm?" Alerym glanced back towards the street, and the other girl laughed. "Here now, my name's Nikil, which you likely already know since you're a clairvoyant and all." There was a pause before the other girl continued. "Alerym? That's an interesting name choice." Strong emotion flickered across her features, a sadness and regret that disappeared almost instantaneously. Alerym made a note to master this since it appeared to be a common occurrence among the other players. Her discomfort must have shown on her face because Nikil moved toward the opening, blocking the exit.

"Are you not a clairvoyant then, Elei?" Alerym shook her head slightly, distracted into answering the question by the sudden shift to a nickname, and the ease with which the strange girl had said it. "So you're an elementalist?" Again, Alerym shook her head. "Do you have any idea what either of those are 'cause I'm pretty sure you're both?" The girl grinned as a third shake affirmed the negative. There was a brief awkward silence before Nikil spoke again.

"You're a clairvoyant," she announced at last. "Same as I am. Mind-reading, telepathy, telekinesis, the works. Basically everything the ESP'ers claim to have in the

real world."

"Clairvoyance? So those thoughts I have...They're...They're really real? That means that Myriad is dead?"

"I...don't know about *that*. That would certainly be news to me. And I'll admit, I've not got the foggiest how you've been going around picking up unprotected thoughts off the Psyche without knowing you could do it, but I guess it might be 'cause..." Nikil trailed off, that look of regret clouding her face again.

Abruptly, she spun about in a half-spin to face the street, as a group of five men burst into the alley. One fell back immediately, blood squirting from a small knife stuck in his throat. Again, Alerym was reminded of Paradigm, especially since she hadn't even seen the throw.

"Record!" the strange girl shouted. In what was now becoming a familiar sensation, Alerym realized she was running, the stranger forcing Alerym along by the wrist, not that she really needed the encouragement. Up ahead, the alley ended abruptly in the large adobe back wall of a building, as Nikil had mentioned before. Apparently she had forgotten though, as she kicked it with a curse in a language Alerym did not recognize.

As she did so, darkness suddenly fell around them, despite it being the middle of the day. Yet Alerym felt she would somehow notice this darkness even if it had been night. The shadowy curtain surrounding them felt as though it were alive with energy. As she pondered this strange occurrence, she felt herself being pulled sideways into a much more comfortable cool than either the street or the alley.

The pure darkness disappeared almost instantly, replaced with the kind she was

more familiar with, the kind she could still somewhat see in. Nikil had let go of her wrist and was investigating their new surroundings.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"Lucky break," Nikil muttered, her face turned into a scowl. A little louder, she clarified, "Someone's interfering, and it's sure as hell good for us. But keep quiet; we're not in the clear yet." She moved away through the room, effortlessly picking a path through the clutter. Not wanting to be left behind, Alerym quickly followed, noticing that Nikil was heading towards a bulk that turned out to be a flight of winding stairs leading up.

As they climbed, a door slammed below them; the hard sound of boots suddenly sounding on the hard-packed earthen floor. Panic flooded her mind and body, and she quickened her pace, hurrying past the other girl, nearly knocking her down the stairs. Grabbing a hold of the back of her shirt, Nikil pulled the younger girl back, shaking her head.

Slow and steady wins the race while those in haste good judgment waste. Alerym started, the telepathic communication catching her off guard. Pulling her back behind her, Nikil motioned for Alerym to follow along carefully. By the time they had reached the landing to the second floor, two of the remaining four men had moved on to search other buildings, and the last two had somehow died. *How do I know that?* she wondered. Nikil's response was immediate, though it answered nothing. *The same way that I do.* Her escort led her through a door on the landing and into a familiar hallway, ignoring Alerym's increasing reluctance.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked softly, still not comfortable with the idea

of these ESP abilities that she supposedly had. Nikil stopped outside of a doorway to a room that Alerym recognized as the one from which she had entered Laeru earlier.

"I'm not taking you anywhere Elei, not unless you want me to. You can walk back down those stairs at any time, or I can warp you somewhere else. Ultimately, I'm heading home to Aldarone." Alerym started at the mention of the fabled city of arrogance that Paradigm had mentioned while preparing the portal from Eldlar to Laeru. The other girl's physical response ignored Alerym's reaction, focusing instead on preparing the circle, and her voice was even as she responded.

"I'm sure you've probably heard some...less than favorable...descriptions of us, but you would be completely safe. And you would also have a good chance to learn more about the extents of your abilities."

"How do you know I'd be safe there?" Alerym asked, an edge of disbelief creeping into her voice. After all, the only person that had not tried to hurt her so far had been Paradigm, and he did not seem to think so highly of Aldarone. And while she had been scared of the men who had appeared in the alley, now that she was alone at the portals, she realized that none of them had been actually threatening her when Nikil had launched her preemptive strike. And even if Nikil were being honest about her intentions, what would make these people she knew behave any differently?

"We're trying to arrange an escort for you outside of Aldarone anyway, so you won't have to worry about that. Paradigm has already agreed to be responsible for your safety, though he does not know he made that bargain with us, and we would like to keep it that way. As far as Aldarone...well, they sort of owe Myriad a favor. A major favor. They weren't in a position to refuse." Having completed her preparations, Nikil turned to

face the other girl. "And as for you still not trusting me...well, maybe this will help with that. You see, for regular dualists like myself, safety is not offered by Aldarone. So please don't let on that I'm anything more than a clairvoyant." Silver eyes met silver eyes, and Alerym couldn't help but shriek despite the danger still present in the building. "After all," Nikil continued, her eyes shining as brightly as Myriad's had, "you're one of us."

* * *

Kiwi leaned over the edge of the building's roof, white hair trailing loosely, enjoying the freedom of being a part of the city's secrets. Of course, technically, there was not much secret about being on top of a roof. Everyone knew there were roofs on top of buildings. But not many people ever actually bothered to venture atop them, and even fewer bothered to look up and ponder them as they traversed the more obvious dangers of the city streets. She could have sat and stared for hours at the people as they passed by on their business, never aware that their attitudes, their habits, were being noticed and observed from on high.

This must be what a god complex feels like, she thought, as she stared up at the building to her left. The one across the alley, Oeil's Outlet, was a good four stories, and this one—the one that comprised the dead-end for the alley and connected this rooftop to the outlet's—was right in the middle, comprised of three.

Such an odd location for a building. And to make an alley dead-end. Although the city's layout came as an oddity to the more open layouts Kiwi was accustomed to, she was even more surprised at her mentor. Kiwi had clearly heard Nikil tell the blue-haired

girl that the alley led into a dead-end, and then she had gone and led her right into it...while being pursued, even!

Frustrated now, she chewed her lip. She was supposed to stay out of sight and not interfere. Nikil's orders. It was not like Nikil needed the help anyway. The other girl was far more capable of defending herself in a scrap than Kiwi was, not to mention that Oeil's Outlet was not only familiar territory, but also presented the deadly girl with the advantage of forced close range fighting through the multitude of corners and hallways.

Even so, Kiwi was still relieved that two of them were now searching the building underneath her instead. Avoidance and stealth were her preferred signature traits since arriving in this world where the combat was so foreign. Magic in particular. She had seen some mages who didn't even need a source object when casting. Nonetheless, neither of the two men would present a problem.

At any rate, investigating the source of that shadow cloud would no doubt be more useful, she decided. Although Nikil was a shadow dualist—a player with both clairvoyant and elemental abilities over shadows—Kiwi had felt Nikil's confusion over the Psyche and knew she had not caused the fortuitous cover. Neither of Nikil's other two shadow-wielding friends had been present, she was certain, or else Nikil would not have responded as she did. And since there could only be three dualists of any given element at any given time in Cadence, that meant there had to be a sage nearby.

Despite her curiosity, Kiwi shuddered at the idea of facing off against a sage. If she could at all avoid a confrontation, she would. Though they started out with just one or two elements, they eventually grew to control all seven. And because of this mastery, they were even theoretically capable of manipulating and combining any elements

present in their environment.

Sensing movement behind her, she turned abruptly, using her innate control of water to seek out what little liquid there was in the desert air. There was no one there. Kiwi clicked her tongue in annoyance, trying to banish the emotions she felt glimmering in the darkness of her mind. Just as suddenly as the surge of superiority and confidence had arrived, it had vanished, leaving a hollow empty space to fill with doubt and fear.

"C'mon out. I know you're there!" she demanded of the near-empty roof, halfway hoping that whoever *was* there would believe she sounded much more confident than she felt and choose to leave rather than comply with her request.

Again, Kiwi reached out to the scarce water content in the air, searching for a suitable source. Though this time she was not prepping for a necessary and quick defense. Most of the roof was relatively dry. Being covered directly by the afternoon sun had dispersed what little condensation there was in the air. What did remain was extremely scarce and mostly coming from the alley. But those sources were not quite the type she was searching for. What she wanted would be far more concentrated, probably the highest concentration of water she would find in the vicinity.

Fear quickly took its grip as Kiwi understood why she had seen no one on the rooftop before. There was, indeed, a high concentration of water particles in the vicinity...collected a single drop above her head and moving rapidly. Moving...down. Panicked, she jerked her head back to look up, too late. The only glimpse she caught was the glint of danger in crimson eyes before the world seeped into blackness.

2.0 Liabilities

The lone warrior marched staunchly through the wastelands of the Handarashi. Laeru was not much farther ahead. Already, he could see the tops of the buildings across the empty desert landscape. The luck that he had had on his journey thus far had been scarcely believable for the adult—he had not seen a single beast since entering the forsaken wastelands of the ferocious desert. That in itself was quite the anomaly. In all his years of fighting throughout Cadence—which had been many, as he had been a player from the game's very first release of this server, and time passed far more quickly within the game—never once had Ato come across such an unusual situation.

The zodiac enforcer shaded his eyes to peer ahead, scanning the landscape around him. Whoever had crossed just before him must have either been very strong or in the company of quite a few other individuals of at least above-average strength. It was impossible to tell which had been the case, as the turbulent winds of the mighty desert were constantly sweeping across the vast expanses, removing all traces of footprints as they crossed. However, Ato had a feeling that the latter was the case. Few in Cadence were strong enough to cross the desert alone.

This in itself unnerved the seasoned enforcer, especially because of his role in the

world. If these individuals proved to be rogues or criminals, Ato would be in serious trouble. Behind each dune could be waiting a blood-thirsty independent or criminal, out for revenge for his crew.

While all players who were not a part of the government-sponsored program received a handful of emergency log-outs—in case they needed to leave before their session expired—Ato had already used up his portion for the month. The emergency exits were granted based on the number of hours that an individual played, but in order to get more than two in a month, one had to play practically all day. Because Ato didn't have the time to play extensively any longer, he had only received one, and he had been forced into using that last week.

The warrior continued on his way, crossing more carefully now that he had fully realized just what a dangerous position he was in. It did not help knowing that some of the danger he kept sensing on all sides was not a beneficial warning from the enhancement skill he had cast before the crossing, but rather a side-effect of the paranoia from the desert's attempts to claim yet another victim. People had not forsaken Handarashi just for its climate, after all. The desert itself was alive—and of a particularly sadistic temperament.

Ato picked up his pace. The sooner he reached Laeru to speak with Kade, the better. Of everyone on the server, the former leader of the enforcers would know what should be done about the startling rumors that had been spreading throughout the land recently. There had even been talk of monsters becoming more and more sentient, travelling into areas that should not have been designated to them by the game's code. The latter especially had many in fear, as there were several who believed that it was only

a matter of time before the towns themselves became subject to invasion by the beasts.

And of course, the other do-gooders had taken to blaming the independent companies of Cadence—the Virai dogs. They claimed that they had witnesses who could prove that Paradigm himself had hacked into the servers and modified the game's coding to make things more dangerous for everyone else. And as if this wasn't bad enough, Myriad had left.

Yes, Ato decided. He must speak with Kade and learn what was going on. If worse came to worse, the zodiacs would have to reband together and take action to protect the citizens of Cadence. It was their sworn duty after all, whether some had retired or not. Protecting the citizens and upholding the laws of the land were more important than the feelings of players about administrator interference.

Out of all of the enforcers, the fearsome Leo had been closest friends with Ato, and he was determined to talk the mighty lion into influencing the world from the position of an enforcer once again. But before he could accomplish any of this, the Handarashi must be safely traversed. Turning back was not an option, not for the zodiac enforcers.

A flicker of movement to his left caught the seasoned warrior's attention, and he spun, withdrawing his blade to meet his opponent's as he moved. Sparks flew from his spell-wrapped blade at the force of the crash. Too late, Ato realized he had not gained a good positioning in the loose sand with his spin, and he quickly found himself being pushed backwards by his opponent, despite the other's much smaller frame.

“Capricorn, the time has come for you to meet your end,” the stranger stated matter-of-factly, as if the outcome of the battle were already known. The use of his

enforcer name temporarily startled Ato, and he slid further back across the ground before digging his heels into the sifting sands.

A quick withdraw followed by an upswing caught his opponent's blade up high. Ato lashed out with his left leg, catching the other fighter in the gut. He hadn't spent so much time in Cadence to bother wasting his breath reasoning with opponents such as this. If this stranger wanted Capricorn to meet his end, then Ato knew that this was a business call, and not a skirmish that he could talk his way out of.

The stranger stumbled backward and doubled over. Quickly, Ato rushed in, determined to end the fight before the other could recover and strike back. In his haste, he missed the telltale switch of the other fighter's lighter sword from his right hand to his left. Ato brought his blade down diagonally, intending to decapitate the other fighter.

The other fighter's blade came in hard from the left, catching Ato off guard as his own blade flew out wide. Withdrawing even faster than Ato had managed, the other fighter knocked the larger man facedown into the sand. The stranger muttered something that the mighty Capricorn couldn't catch, and he heard a strange sound from behind him.

Winded, he tried to lift his head to look. In his peripheral vision, he could just barely see that the blade's appearance had changed, becoming more akin to the heavily pixelated weapons of earlier online games. A strange darkness radiated outward from the cloaked stranger, a darkness unlike anything he had ever seen in-game save for once. It wasn't merely a darkness. It was shadow. Shadow that moved under the command of the sentient behind it.

"Colon?" he wheezed, the syllables coming out forced. The attacker offered no response, instead repositioning the blade for a downward strike. Ato forced air into his

bruised lungs, determined not to let his attacker come away clean from this encounter.

"HACK!" he shouted, hoping the game's recording would kick in. The effort it took forced him to wince, surprising the warrior. Just what had been done to that blade to incapacitate him so easily? "Dualist scum," he sputtered, forcing himself to speak again. "You won't get away with this. Colon. You won't..."

Immense pain wracked through his body, and he knew that this battle had officially ended. It had been a long time since he had felt Cadence's death sensations, he realized, as he was disconnected from the server.

The world around him faded from view, as he faded from it. It was all right though; he could respawn in 24 hours right from where today's session had ended. He could still complete his mission. It would take longer to speak to Kade now, but he could try the journey tomorrow.

And perhaps it would be better this way. Kade would be viewing the recording from the encounter before Ato even made it back into the game, and Ato doubted that the moderator would remain inactive after such a blatant display of code hacking. He just had to wait until he could try again. After all, it was only a game; death wasn't real here. He still had another hour before his daughter made it back from her friend's house, at any rate. He could watch the news while he waited. It was only a game. But he would still make sure that Colon paid dearly for delaying him nonetheless.

* * *

The striking flashes of red and blue cut through the downpour, stereotypical

Chicago cop weather given the manner of this visit. The detective pulled in behind the squad car already parked in the street in front of the house. Peering through the onslaught of precipitation, Detective Davis could just make out the outline of a third car in front of the squad's, its haphazard parking even more conspicuous in the relatively empty street.

Judging from the ridiculously crazed parking and the unusual time for someone to be at home in this working class neighborhood, she was guessing a relative of the deceased. Wrenching herself around in her seat, the wiry detective fished around in the backseat, pulling out a dark brown umbrella. She'd had enough of the black garb get-up of her predecessors. She was a detective, not an undertaker. She shouldn't have to dress like one.

Forcing the car door open against the onslaught, Davis shot the umbrella's arms open with the agility of one well accustomed to this manner of leaving a vehicle. Yet Mother Nature still laughed in the face of this skill—one she'd acquired after years of living in Rainier—completely drenching the interior upholstery to such a degree that it prompted a string of mild curses as the door slammed shut. The rain itself was cold enough; but in the middle of July, it offered only moderate relief from the humidity.

Forging her way up the slope to the front door, Davis took refuge under the small porch, cursing the lack of effect her one defense against the onslaught had had. After wringing her clothes out the best she could without slipping on the slick pavement, she composed herself for the waterworks that no doubt awaited inside as well. *Knock.*

The deceased, an adult male in his late twenties, had been found dead in this small Chicago suburb a little after two in the afternoon. *Knock.*

His six-year-old daughter had been the one to find him after a friend's parent

dropped her off. *Knock.*

A glance at her wristwatch informed her it was almost half after three. *Knock.*

The door opened to reveal a rather petite African woman. Red rings framed her eyes, and she was also still soaking from the deluge outside. The officer already on the scene, who identified herself as one Officer Tavert, introduced the woman as Rachel Oregon, ex-wife of the deceased, before adding that the daughter was upstairs packing her things.

Informing the woman that she'd have questions for her and her daughter shortly, Detective Davis directed the woman towards the stairs. Tavert prudently waited until the woman was out of sight before sharing what she'd learned so far.

"Although they're divorced, the ex-wife and the deceased are apparently still good friends. Their custody arrangement was rather short-handed on his end, but she allowed him extra access to his kids..."

"*Kids?*" Davis broke in.

"There's also an older boy, but he's been spending most of his time at his mother's apartment on account of summer school."

"I see. How's the deceased?"

Officer Tavert handed the detective a business card. "That's the contact card for the medical examiner. He added a private number to the back of it for you since it's practically the weekend already. He said he'd be staying late with the body to deduce as much as he could for you as soon as possible, so not to call it until at least ten tonight."

The unexpected promptness caught Davis off guard. Her surprise must have shown on her face because the officer chuckled. "Williams is a bit obsessed in his work.

He'll work with you to get this wrapped up pronto. Probably why the brass assigned you to the case. They want it over and done with. Not like that comatose girl in Tampa that's still dragging on." The detective sighed. That was the downside of a reputation. You always caught the frustrating cases once you developed a good one.

"I'll check with him later. What can you tell me about this guy off-hand?"

"Not much...The guy was found dead at his computer. His ex said he'd always been healthy and active. No medical history at all; that's why she called us."

Davis nodded and approached the computer. Personally, she thought calling the police for something like this was over the top, though if the ex hadn't, the medical personnel would have as soon as they had received any suspicion the victim was a player. Standard procedure after Tampa now. The idea was to nip these cases in the bud before the rumor mill had a chance to get started. Of course, there was little of use to her on the computer at the moment.

"Did you touch this at all? Close any programs?"

"The kid shut down the computer before I got here. Do you think this is related to...?" Davis shook her head, cutting the officer off.

"It's probably nothing. Your mentioning Tampa had me jumpy is all. That being said, I don't care what Brant and Connors have to say about the safety of that gaming headset of theirs. This virtual reality nonsense is too much."

Officer Tavert nodded her head sagely to the detective's words. No doubt she too had heard about the recent accident of one of the Connors sisters. The relatives of the Tampa girl were calling it karma, but the surviving sister and her extended family were strongly adamant that the "game's newest casualty"—as the media were calling it—hadn't

been playing the game when she had somehow had her “incident.”

Inspecting the computer desk in the living room, Detective Davis picked up a box she recognized from the news media's coverage of the girls in Tampa and Cali. *Bingo*.

"The developers are not liable for any health risks encountered while playing," she read aloud. *We'll see about that.*

2.1 City of Clouds

Alerym sat with Nikil on the stone steps outside of the building inside of which Nikil had presented Alerym's bid for acceptance into Aldarone just moments before. Like Laeru, most of the buildings here were comprised of a single material. However, whereas the choice there had been some type of adobe brick, here the buildings were built from a simple, dark grey rock.

While the other buildings in the vicinity exuded elegance with their exquisite form and attention to detail, the one the two girls sat outside of was remarkably plain by the very nature of its unremarkable design. Still, her hands marveled at the smoothness of the rock, with no trace of blemish or crack, as her eyes gazed hungrily out across the pebbled paths and wisps of cloud that hung about the quiet, sleepy city.

"Are they really going to erase my memory of this place if the vote's negative?" she asked the more knowledgeable girl, the prospect of losing knowledge of the wondrous city for the moment paramount in her thoughts. Nikil smiled with what looked like genuine sadness to Alerym as she nodded.

"But they can't make any decision until Mai'Kyoto comes back from Laeru with her report." With this news, Alerym drew her legs up tight, burying her head in her

knees. While it was worrisome enough that Paradigm, Liux, *and* the men who had attacked them had known about her, it was even more unnerving to hear that an entire city had not only known of her existence but had been preparing for her arrival and monitoring her without her knowledge.

"A secret city of hated players and you thought we wouldn't know you were here?" Nikil laughed. "Admittedly, we hadn't heard anything definite about Myriad being killed...although...several of our number were beginning to suspect as much. The boy you were with, Liux, is an associate of Raen, someone we were investigating, and who we believe Myriad was, as well. They are, of course, responsible for the attack outside Oeil's Outlet." Her mention of the outlet reminded the girl of their first encounter in the city.

"You said before...You said that you thought I was both. An elemental and a clairvoyant." Nikil nodded slowly.

"A dualist, yes." *Be cautious of what you say aloud*, she warned over the Psyche.

"You also said that y—that dualists weren't welcome in Aldarone."

"That is also correct, yes."

"Then why would they help me? Aren't I like...I mean, aren't I a dualist?" Her new friend—and Alerym was surprised to realize that she already counted Nikil as her friend even if she had not considered Paradigm so—sighed, not even bothering to hide it. Long and drawn out, it startled the other girl.

"It's...sort of a complicated situation. I guess you could say it's reparations of a sort. The dualist Alerym feared for her life—rightly so—and requested sanctuary from Aldarone, stating that she was not a hacker and therefore should not be denied entrance since she met the other criteria. It was, of course, denied. Your situation is different.

While technically you may be playing a hacked character, you did not do the hacking yourself. On the same note, many of the people here recognize that not everyone in Cadence will make that key distinction."

"Was she your friend?" Alerym asked, momentarily forgetting Nikil's warning to be cautious of what she said out loud in the open. Nikil noticeably winced at the slip, before forcing her expression to brighten as she waved. Alerym glanced up as three people—two girls and a boy—approached the building. Nikil stood and began to greet them before pausing for a minute and turning back.

"I...I don't believe anyone should have the right to hurt another person in the way that was done to her. Especially not for the offense she committed." *Which was nonexistent*, she added telepathically, as she continued towards the others—the girls at least, whom Alerym now recognized as Mia and Lia from Laeru. *So much for the possibility of making friends **not** wrapped up in intrigue and mystery*, she thought miserably.

Mia gave Nikil a quick hug then quickly climbed the steps in haste and disappeared into the building. The boy also embraced Nikil in greeting, something that Alerym noticed Nikil wasn't quite comfortable with. The three of them discussed something she could not hear although she could definitely see Nikil's animated gestures. A frown crossed Lia's face, but whatever was wrong was quickly dispelled by the boy, who Alerym assumed must be Cless. The trio crossed back to the steps to join her, and Nikil introduced the two as Il'iko and Cless, the latter of whom nodded in greeting before entering the building.

"Cless is more concerned about this whole mess than he lets on," Lia, or Il'iko,

admitted once their friend had safely disappeared inside.

"I'm sorry, but the interest he expressed in Eldlar and Laeru towards Alerym's welfare was genuine," Nikil returned, frowning. "If Alerym has no complaints, and if we can get him to accept payment again, we'd be fools to pass it up." The use of her name caught her attention, but she still did not understand what exactly the other girls were discussing.

"Mai'Kyoto will argue in your favor," Il'iko acknowledged, "but Paradigm hates us, or rather, the idea of us. Do you have any idea what he might do to you if he finds out he was played—and by members of Aldarone, no less!"

"Oh, I'd wager he already has an inkling where his last payment came from," Nikil retorted. "I barely said a word in Eldlar anyway, so as long as someone else handles the payment, he won't *have* a reason to suspect we're involved over our heads in this. And besides, so long as I paint any discovery on his part as our using Alerym for our own ends, she will be fine."

"What!?" Alerym exclaimed, shocked and hurt by the blunt admission. She was having trouble following the line of conversation, that much was true—it almost sounded like Nikil had said they had paid Paradigm to protect her in the forests—but that last line had been spoken clear as day. Il'iko's lavender braids went flying with wild laughter at the outburst.

"What Nikil's saying is that if Paradigm had no solid proof that the ones paying him were from Aldarone; or if he or others like him were to discover the two of you are from Aldarone, that he'd still protect you if we made it look like we were using you. Most of Cadence is like that. If they think we were screwing you over, they'd back you up for

free. An army at your beck and call."

"Even though none of them will do jack shit for you now," Nikil added, and Il'iko shot her a look. The dark-haired girl just shrugged. "Well, it's true. Tell her."

"I guess..." Il'iko began, wondering why she was giving this lecture instead of Nikil, who had spent far more time researching the subject material. "There are about 4000 players in Cadence. According to information Myriad has given us, no more than 5 percent of the population can lay claim to having these 'hacked' abilities at any given time. There are also never more than twelve elementalists and three dualists for each element at any given time although sages do not count towards this total."

"Clairvoyants," Nikil clarified, "have abilities similar to what one would expect from popular literature in the real world—mind-reading, telekinesis, and mental communication. They also have abilities enabling them to mentally track and/or locate other players, as well as skills to prevent the memory division that occurs between Cadence and the real world. Since no one knows exactly how many sages there are, we assume that there are 84 clairvoyants, same as elementalists.

"Elementalists, on the other hand, have control over specific elements already present in their environment. Some learn a few spells, so that they can conjure their element if it's not already present and to make it easier to pass off their abilities as magic."

Il'iko nodded, glad Nikil was paying enough attention to elaborate on what would be very unfamiliar terminology to the new girl. "But," she broke in, "it's important to remember that while elementalists pass off their abilities as magical spells to others, there are no spells out there that can actually mimic an elementalists work. Wielding an

element is also far less tiring than casting spells.

"There are seven elements," Il'iko continued, "which we rather eloquently have dubbed Red, Blue, Yellow, Green, Brown, Grey, and Black. Their respective constituents are fire, water, and power—which often materializes as electricity, though something approaching telekinesis is also possible. Green and Brown are flora and earth. Grey and Black are a bit odd in that they are said to make up two constituents. Grey is synonymous with the idea of both wind and light while Black is of night and shadow.

"So far as identification goes, the pupils of elementalists have flecks of their color although most of the time they disguise this color in an effort to prevent persecution."

"For example," Nikil elaborated, "Yellows have golden flecks." Il'iko nodded and continued.

"Dualists could possibly be identified by their silver irises and pupils, but as Myriad and the elementalists have demonstrated, eye color can be easily disguised. And they have even more reason to do so than the other classes. Anything else?" she asked, the last part directed at Nikil.

"The entire point, actually," the other girl replied, obviously amused to Il'iko's relief. Nikil had been unusually distant and concerned lately about something, and it had been worrying her small group of friends in Aldarone.

"Oh, right! Why everybody hates us! Something about us being arrogant bastards because we don't make ourselves common among others." Alerym looked in confusion to Nikil, who pulled a face, amused at Il'iko's easy ability to slip in and out of lecture mode.

"Lia," the warning tone was as evident in her voice as the smile was genuine.

"Sorry," Il'iko replied unconvincingly. "But it's more or less the reason. Those

who even believe Aldarone exists forget that our secrecy is done out of necessity. You see, in Cadence's early years, our abilities were feared; and we were lumped together with the dualists and sages as hackers and abusers of the game.

"Many players were hunted down and repeatedly killed to the point where the game was evicting them, so our secrecy was integral to our survival. If Myriad had not founded Aldarone and locked our gates so that only those with the code variant that enabled our abilities could pass through, we would still be in that same situation. At least now we have somewhere to hide."

"Granted, sometimes hiding in plain sight is the best option. There are many who still believe us to be code manipulators despite our innocence," Nikil added, but of course only Alerym understood the double entendre in her words. "The original Alerym was killed permanently as a byproduct of these inquisitions, and it's why Aldarone will likely extend protection to you...as a sort of reparation effort since it's not your fault that you have dualist abilities."

"But you need to remember that this prejudice runs strong and deep still in our world," Il'iko reminded her. "Paradigm has taken a liking to you, for some reason we don't understand."

Nikil nodded her agreement. "He didn't have to accept our payment, Elei. If he finds out you have *Aldarone's* protection, there's a very good chance he might not stick around...he may even turn on you. So you'd do well to keep it a secret. Wildcard he may be, but he's a powerful ally for you to have on your side."

Alerym nodded in understanding, sighing. All this talk, it was depressing. *What was it I thought before? How it seemed that these girls were less dangerous than Liux*

and Paradigm?

"Yes, you're right. It is depressing," Nikil laughed. "Let me show you how to set up safes in your mind to prevent nosy people like me from butting in all the time."

2.2 Altercation Diversion

"We are going to the pub then, I take it?" Jairo asked, once the duo were in the clear. While there had been some pursuit, it had been easily deterred by the gathered Virai. Xaff could still hear shouts from people who had begun to realize they'd been robbed. Most of them wouldn't even realize it till later. As he'd hoped, the Enforcer pair had more-or-less ignored the entire fiasco. Maybe they'd even pull a Zadex and switch allegiances. The mage shook his head, and Xaff smiled, glad his friend didn't get too irritated when he lost himself in thought.

"Oh come on," Xaff wheedled, poking the mage. "If you're good, I might let you talk to Zadex," he joked, amused as his friend's face paled considerably. Without waiting for an answer, Xaff headed off towards the pub.

"You're gonna have to face her sooner or later," he called back over his shoulder. To his relief, Jairo hurried to catch up. Xaff really had not wanted to visit the pub without Jairo there to take the bulk of the redhead's notorious temper.

Despite being close to the same age as the two friends, Zadex had been playing even longer, having been recruited into Cadence several game years before Xaff and Jairo had joined. Well-experienced in the ways of the playing-fields, she knew her stuff; as

Jairo and Xaff had discovered the hard way.

Lately though, she had switched allegiances, preferring, as many did, the care-free ways of those who chose not to align with either of the two extremist factions. Even if it meant dirtying your hands from time to time, the freedom of choice was decidedly worth it.

Although few cared to admit it, Xaff suspected that the popularity and attention Paradigm had managed to achieve also had some influence in regards to the recent swapping of allegiances. In their case, some of it proved beneficial. For example, Zadex was one less vigilante that the thieves and petty criminals had to worry about. Yet on the other hand, they were also attracting a multitude of characters that Xaff would have much preferred never having met.

As of late, there seemed to have been a shortage in new players as well, thus affecting those players who had made their living pathetically scavenging off players who had never visited Cadence before. And for some odd reason, they seemed to think they were welcome amongst the rest of the vagabonds. Probably because they were too pathetically inept to join one of the real criminal allegiances throughout the land. Thankfully, few of those made it into the mesh with the rest of those who had been there awhile and legitimately earned their places in the various hierarchies.

They passed by a few of these locales that catered to these fools on their way to Oeil's Outlet, a pleasant little store-tavern combo offering a variety of goods and services ranging from clothes all the way to private meeting rooms. However, that was merely a front to the true function of the Outlet. Oeil's also doubled as one of the premier gathering places for the various vagabonds of Cadence. This true nature of Oeil's business was

perhaps the best-kept secret in the lands. Few were entrusted with the secret of its existence, and even fewer of those—even among the patrons of the Outlet themselves—had any idea of its location, as it was always referred to as "the pub." In fact, not even Kade or Myriad knew of its actual location, and they were Cadence's admins!

And that is the beauty of this place, Xaff thought to himself. Although it was fairly common knowledge amongst the rabble that Myriad, at least, knew that the pub was located in Laeru, and, as well-liked as she was, that she could probably discover its location if she had a mind to; the fact still remained that she would not. The pub was good for the economy of Cadence, and as long as they kept from the nefarious actions of the worst of the criminal leagues—even those were not strictly kept in line—neither Kade nor Myriad would take any action against them.

The large adobe-style building loomed up before them, larger than most of the other stores that frequented Ashter Lane, but not to the point where it would stick out.

"Do we really have to come here now?" Jairo asked as they approached the door.

"Of course not," Xaff answered cheerfully, "you can always tell Zadex later that you were wandering around for a few days before you deigned to come and visit her, ya know!"

"Why do you take such delight in tormenting me?" his friend asked gloomily.

"My actions are hardly torture compared to what she would do to you, as you surely realize? I'd prefer to think that I am doing you a favor."

"Yeah, you would," Jairo muttered as Xaff pushed him through the door. "You're just like him." Xaff winced a bit at the remark.

The inside of the store was even more crowded than the streets outside. Even

though Oeil's Outlet was merely a cover-up operation, it still earned a plethora of business on its own. Of course, those who used the Pub also tended to use the services that its front offered, as well. And the more customers the Outlet had, the cheaper services were in the Pub. Thus, it only stood to reason that the Pub's patrons were additionally very loyal customers of the Outlet who frequently harped to everyone they came upon about how great the service and the girls were at Oeil's Outlet.

Not seeing any familiar faces that were not already assisting others, Xaff and Jairo marched straight up towards the counter, bypassing the long line waiting to be served. This prompted several dismayed remarks, which increased in volume as the distance to the counter decreased reciprocally. Keeping a return eye on those in line, Xaff was almost surprised when the expected threat lunged up in front of them, as one burlesque man leaped from his chair so fast that it fell over, bellowing "Hey there! You want to use this place; you got to wait in line like everyone else!" Instantly, the large room hushed, as all other activity ceased.

Xaff looked over to Oeil, who was sitting back behind the counter, where the line began. The burlesque proprietor nodded, and Xaff was glad to know that the customer had already paid. He returned his gaze back to the man, cocking his head to the side, eyeing the large man and his weapon—a giant axe strapped to his broad back—with his signature patronizing grin.

"I don't feel much like dealing with loud-mouths idiots like yourself today," he commented. "Think you could get the hell out of my way?" A few of the Pub's regulars laughed from various corners of the Outlet, and the man's face flushed red.

"Why you impudent little runt!" the stranger shouted, reaching for the axe

strapped to his back. Amazingly, he brought it to bear a bit faster than the thief had anticipated, swinging it full force at the young boy, who sidestepped back and away enough for the man to see Jairo, or, more specifically, the spell the mage had just finished preparing. His eyes widened as he eyed the ball of electricity at Jairo's fingertips.

"Oh, so you're not entirely foolish," the mage remarked calmly, letting his hand start to fall. Sensing a weakness, the stranger lunged at the boy, only to find himself flying to the other side of the room.

"Do I really deserve so little credit?" the mage asked his friend, adjusting his glasses. Xaff merely shrugged in answer. Across the room, the man struggled to his feet.

"You can just stay out of this!" he thundered. "This is between me and the other runt—the one not man enough to fight for himself." The thief smiled. He really loved it when they practically fed him his comebacks.

"If anything, this is between me and the fellows in line. *You* were already seated and taken care of, but you felt like playing the role of rule-keeper in a location that has none. Seems you bit off more than you can chew, taking on such a role in the middle of a bustling pub." Having noticed the fighting, Oeil's waitstaff burst into action, dragging magically-lightened tables away from the area of conflict so quickly that their occupants barely had time to register they'd been moved.

The man raced toward Xaff again, and Jairo moved well and away to the side, giving his friend all the space he might need. The thief nodded his appreciation as a dagger appeared in his hand from the sheath up his sleeve. The first throw took the man in the arm; the second grazing the charging man's ear, and then the axe was lunging towards him yet again.

Deftly, Xaff hopped backwards, before darting in just behind the man's swing, knowing full well that the stranger could not reverse the swing in time to halt him. The boy stood in front of the man, dagger angled upwards at his throat.

"To be quite honest, I'd really rather not waste my time with garbage like you," Xaff stated as seriously as he could manage. "Therefore, it is in my highly *self-esteemed* opinion that I would recommend you to remove yourself from the premises as close to immediately as possible, unless you're actually fool enough to believe that your stupidity and obstinance can finish this?"

"My stupidity and obstinance, or your blind youthful pride?" the man sputtered back, voice choked with barely controlled fury. "I would suggest that you'd best watch yourself boy. One of these days, your luck'll run out. And you've just made a powerful enemy." To the man's obvious surprise, the thief laughed it off.

"Jairo?" he asked his companion, who thought for a moment.

"One-hundred forty-four, excluding anyone during the time I was gone." The man eyed both boys, confused as to the origin of the number.

"Okay, now as you can clearly see, I've got prior obligations to 143 other people who want to beat the shit out of my pompous little jackass self," the boy explained. "So, unfortunately you're just gonna have to wait till it gets to your turn. And make no doubt that it will, so you'd best be ready before you come back to challenge me again. And could you try to make it interesting? Maybe bring a few friends?"

Xaff stepped away from the man, who wisely decided to sheathe his axe before attempting a prideful stride out of the Outlet, amidst a multitude of laughter. The two friends resumed their walk up to the counter, this time unbothered, although Xaff noticed

that they did fall subject to more than a few dirty glances from those people still waiting in line.

"Ye got lucky Jairo boy," Oeil confided when they reached the counter. Zadex had the day off today, so ye don't gotta worry about explainin' where the hell you been all this time." The mage shifted his glasses.

"I fail to understand why I should have to disclose anything to anyone here," he remarked offhand. Oeil eyed the boy closely, then looked to Xaff, who shook his head.

"Well, I'll be gettin' some healin' salve ready then," the big man muttered, adding, almost as an afterthought, "summon's waitin for ye in Room 413. Shouldn't keep 'em waitin so long."

"Waiting for us already? Who?" Xaff couldn't help but ask, but the big man only gestured towards the back stairs.

The rentable meeting rooms at Oeil's Outlet were more-or-less organized according to three different factors. The rooms at the top of those stairs were the highest in quality and were rented only to those with specific knowledge of the Pub, regardless of wealth or strength. The next block of rooms on the third floor were typically rented out to those with large amounts of wealth. The rooms closest to the front, and subsequently the regular store, were for everyone else. Thus, the second floor was typically the most highly frequented, on account that those rooms were cheap and easily available to almost anyone. The Outlet's Portals being located on the second floor probably had almost as much to do with it as well.

Jairo started up the stairs first, and the thief followed. They cleared the first flight of stairs in uneasy silence, the one behind the other. Halfway up the second flight of

stairs, Xaff cleared his throat, and Jairo stopped. After a few moments of uneasy silence, the mage spoke.

"Are you planning to ask me where I have been as well?"

Xaff started at the accusatory tone in his friend's voice. Like any other human, Jairo had been prone to moments of testiness, yet never before had the mage actively lashed out at another person—well, another friend—in the same manner he had done just a few moments ago. Xaff kept his silence, opting instead to continue past his friend, realizing that to answer him in truthfulness would only instigate another negative reaction.

"I know you want to ask!" the mage shouted, grabbing Xaff's sleeve and forcing the thief to face him. "Why in the hell don't you!?"

"Because you're just looking for an excuse to yell at someone," Xaff answered calmly, pulling away and continuing up the next flight of stairs. The mage started to interject, but the thief cut him off. "I don't get why you're beating around the bush," he called back. "If you want to yell at me, just do it already. I don't really care."

Jairo stared up at his friend, surprised at the simple remark. Before he could protest, Xaff continued.

"I don't know what the hell happened. I don't expect you to tell me what happened. But keep in mind that none of us can do a damned thing about it if you want to sit around and yell at anyone that asks a simple, harmless question."

"Doesn't matter," the mage mumbled, "Not like anything can be done about it now at any rate."

Xaff opened his mouth to respond, but stopped to reconsider. If it was anyone

else, he probably would have argued that last point further. But aside from his temper, Jairo was not your typical, emotional, teenager; something that Xaff had learned quite well during their time together, and something that had drawn them in so close together. Neither did he fit the classic stereotypical cliches of angst-filled youths brooding away for months on end.

No, whatever had happened two months ago had been serious enough to unnerve his companion greatly. And if Jairo honestly believed that nothing in the present could remedy what had occurred in the past, then it was as simple as that: there wasn't going to be any easy fix.

"You'll have to come up with something else though—something that doesn't involve yelling. People are gonna ask you where you've been. There's no avoiding that. Especially Zadex." The thief turned back to look at his friend, who nodded slowly before moving to join him.

"About that," the mage said slowly, "if you don't mind, I think I'd actually rather not meet with Zadex for awhile." Xaff looked his friend over carefully before voicing his consent; his suspicions had been confirmed. Something terrible had happened on the playing fields, something strong enough to drive Jairo outside of the safety of Cadence, away from the support offered by the group of people the two boys had come to call friends. Curiosity was gnawing at his insides as to what could possibly have such a profoundly negative effect on his friend. Yet at the same time, Xaff couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't better off being kept in the dark.

2.3 Briefing

Alerym stepped out of the dying portal and into the upper floor of Oeil's Outlet for the second time that day. A tall, skinny male was leaning against the wall next to the beaded curtain. He looked the two girls over impassively, but said nothing.

"There's nothing to hide from her, Colon," Nikil said, addressing him. Colon eyed Alerym again, and she shrunk back under the gaze. It was angry now and cold.

"What do you want? I already told you I'll have nothing to do with this waste."

"Hide a little more, then, I take that back," Nikil retorted, wrapping a protective arm around the other girl and positioning herself slightly between the two. "It's Kiwi I need your help with, at any rate. I don't think she's in Laeru anymore, but Noroh's here now. Can you make sure she doesn't come back?"

"Don't think?" he echoed, and Nikil nodded. "I can't seem to pick up any trace of her."

"EMP?" he asked, referring to the devices that cloaked a player's presence from clairvoyants. Nikil shrugged.

"Well, I doubt she's doing it to herself intentionally, so maybe. But I can't very well go looking for her right now."

"Because you're too busy stuck in the past," the boy said, slipping through the curtain to emphasize the finality of his words.

"I could say the same for you," the girl muttered, sounding annoyed. She turned to Alerym, offering her elbow with a smile. "Shall we then?" Alerym took it, wondering as she did why Nikil looked more hurt than she had sounded. As usual, she didn't have long to wonder about this strange new girl who was calling herself her friend before Nikil had her downstairs and in the streets of the city below, on some new whirlwind activity—like shopping, she thought with bewilderment.

* * *

Colon picked up this last thought from Nikil with disgust. He understood that Nikil could not easily search for Kiwi with Alerym in tow, but he did not understand why she was even bothering with babysitting this worthless newbie in the first place. The girl was useless. She could not fight, defend herself, or even heal, for the elements' sake. The high and mighty City of Pompous Buffoons had already tricked Paradigm into assisting the girl. For Nikil to stay in the spotlight was only going to put them all at unnecessary risk.

In an even fouler mood than he had been before, he stalked back to the meeting room he had rented, pausing outside the door. He pinched the upper bridge of his nose, between the eyes, wishing the pounding would go away. Kiwi would simply have to wait. There were other matters to attend to first. At least, if he wanted to keep his sanity.

While shadow dualists were arguably the strongest fighters around, capable of

summoning and slipping in and out of shadows at will; their power came at a hefty price. Elementalists typically could cast longer than mages because they were constantly accumulating energy. The problem with shadow dualists was that this energy took a negative bent. The higher the energy reserve the dualist attempted to maintain, the more likely they were to lash out at those around them irrationally. Shaking the negativity from his head, he entered the room.

"She still do-gooding it up?" asked the boy waiting inside, leaning back on the table with his arms splayed out behind him as props. *At least one of my apprentices is reliable*, he thought and pointedly directed it over the Psyche towards Nikil. For all that he could tell, she was ignoring him, though they did appear to be shopping for equipment to help Alerym with being useful in combat.

"Hardly," he said to Lode. "It's just these two girls and to Hell with anyone else. Be nice if she spent this much effort on finding useful things, like Lore." The younger boy sat up straight and shrugged. He liked shrugging of late, Colon noticed. It was as though he had developed a nervous tic primarily for shrugging all the damned time. He wondered if it was related to the boy's shadow levels since it hadn't been an issue before.

"Maybe she is. Wasn't this Alerym chick all chummy with Myriad before she up and disappeared?"

"Which doesn't do us a damned whit of good. Kade was the one responsible for locking Lore away."

"Myriad. Kade. What's the diff?" Lode shrugged again. "So we gonna do this or not? You ain't in a stable mood for sure, an' I could stand to blow some of this energy off, myself."

The older boy leveled a glare at the younger, but unsheathed the sword from his back. Lode remained on the table, unmoving. Feeling about him for the shadows in the room, Colon gather them together around the bare blade, so that it streamed eerily with a blackish blue hue. Abruptly, he slashed diagonally into open space, opening a portal into the dark oblivion beyond.

* * *

Xaff and Jairo reached 413, and the thief walked through without bothering to knock.

"Surprise, surprise" Xaff commented when he saw the one who had been waiting for them, aptly hiding his surprise at the white-haired girl also present in the room.

A cocky grin reminiscent of the younger thief's danced its way across the slightly older male's face as he reclined the simple wooden chair back on two legs, his own resting upon the matching table. Unlike Xaff's own dark green locks, the crimson ones of the older thief partially covered his face; coupled with like-colored eyes, his appearance succeeded in granting him a more sinister appearance than his counterpart. Amusement sparked in those crimson orbs as he eyed the two friends.

The girl, on the other hand, ignored the newcomers, keeping her back to the door, as she sat adjacent to Paradigm at the table. As best as Xaff could tell, she found the opposite wall extremely interesting, undecorated as it was.

Jairo closed the door carefully before crossing the room to take a seat in another chair against the far wall, across from the girl while Xaff chose to lean against the wall

directly across from his opposite, eyes never leaving the other thief.

"It's not polite to keep your elders waiting, Xaff," the man said, clapping his hands together.

"A few years hardly renders you my elder," the youth shot back with a carefree laugh, a laugh that did not match his careful scrutiny of the other. Jairo glanced over at his friend, noting the atmosphere in the room had changed, and Xaff quickly resumed his carefree grin. "Besides, you've probably only been here, what, twenty minutes now? Unless the server's lost it again, 'Paradigm' was offline when I came on."

"Bah, you still kept me waiting. Yet I must digress, that's not why we're meeting now. I trust you found the entertainment in the square to your liking?" Xaff cocked his head to the side, allowing the small knife to pass harmlessly by and stick quivering in the wall behind him.

"About as much as you throwing things at me," he commented dryly, and the mage settled back more comfortably in his chair. The girl, on the other hand, looked noticeably more alert, and Xaff noticed her eyes—or at least the one uncovered by hair—were a bright gold.

"What's all this about?" an already bored Jairo queried sharply, prompting an obviously exaggerated distressed look from Paradigm.

"My dear Jairo, I must admit that I am wounded by your words. I merely heard that my talented young protégé was in Laeru with his benevolent mageling companion and thought to see how they were doing, what with the many changes in the hierarchies lately and all."

"Right, so what about the hierarchies has changed?" the mage asked impatiently.

"Is that honestly all you have to say?" Paradigm laughed, a harsh sound that typically induced fear in his opponents. The cruel grin resumed its place. "Sooo, my dear benevolent Jairo, why have you been hiding these last two months?"

Moving quickly, Xaff intercepted the irate mage almost as soon as he had leaped from his seat, pushing him back down.

"Intentional," the mage protested as his friend attempted to wave him into silence, "Jerk said it inten..."

"Firstly," Xaff interrupted, ignoring his friend's words and instead focusing on his fellow thief, "You're insane if you expect us to believe that nonsense for a minute. Secondly, I'm hardly your protégé. And thirdly, Jairo's nowhere close to benevolent today. He's been a royal jackass, as I'm sure you were aware of before we arrived. Thus, my good friend is correct in asking you what the Hell do you mean that the hierarchies have changed?"

The two thieves stared at one another for several moments; hard, crimson eyes locking the softer, mottled browns of his counterpart. At last, Paradigm settled back into his chair, swinging his legs off the top of the table and allowing those of his chair to rest evenly upon the floor. Taking the unspoken cue, Xaff released the mage and resumed his position against the opposite wall. To his relief, Jairo remained seated, apparently having realized that his temper would not earn the pair a whit of information out of their enigmatic informant. Xaff noted the girl looked disappointed now.

"To be quite frank, there isn't exactly a whole lot to tell," Paradigm admitted. "Myriad secretly took leave although rumor has it her character was erased, and you know what that means, I'm sure." Xaff ran through the knowledge he had of Cadence's

history. It wasn't much since he was still fairly new. Slowly, he shook his head.

"A repeat of the Alerym Incident," Paradigm clarified. Xaff shook his head again. This wasn't ringing any bells. The older thief sighed. "There was a girl named Alerym from Year 1. Apparently, she fell in with the dualists—the hackers who were able to manipulate the game to gain extra abilities. In Year 6, Kade started an Inquisition into their little group. Myriad opposed it and sided with the dualists, but no one really paid much attention. A lot of the cheaters were evicted from the server by parties that specifically targeted their characters. The original Enforcers—the Zodiacs—were part of this group.

"How long ago was this in the real world?" Jairo broke in, his face clearly displaying that he was running calculations in his head unsuccessfully.

"Well, with it being standardly accepted that four of our years equal one year in the real world, this would've been in the second half of the second year that the game was released." Understanding dawned on Xaff.

"So is this 'Alerym' individual that girl who went into the coma while playing the game?" he asked. The other thief nodded.

"That was in Year 8. Although Myriad claimed that a few individuals had suggested that a method had been uncovered that would cut off a player's consciousness from their body by hacking the headset from the game's side, it was never proven that anyone from this game had been involved in the incident. Nonetheless, there was a public outcry; by Year 9, all of the hackers who had not already been uncovered were dismissed from the game by Kade himself since Myriad still opposed the action. And, somehow, this information ended up channeled to the do-gooders; who, of course, view it as an

outrage, an appropriate example of the lack of leadership displayed on Cadence—that the dualists were able to evade authority for so long thanks to Myriad."

"Right, so what does your slipping knowledge to the do-gooders have to do with changes to the hierarchies?" Jairo asked.

"Because Myriad was the only thing keeping Raen's fringe movement from creating a schism within us," Xaff threw in, following Paradigm's reasoning. "You used the do-gooders to attract attention to Myriad's departure as a warning."

From his chair, the mage snorted. "You're giving his concept of ethics way too much credit."

"Commentary duly noted," the older thief responded dryly. "Yet, you are indeed correct. I instigated the fools more for our own good than for that of the rest of the players. The last thing we need is even more of those bastards chasing down and annihilating our more harmless players. Not if we are going to survive this."

Brown eyes shut to reflect on the problem. While bad news in and of itself, there had to be more to the problem than just this if it had prompted Paradigm to take action. True, they were going to have a hell of a time now, as their dwindling ranks would likely not have much in the way to offer against Raen's promises of wealth, prosperity, a new Cadence, or what have you.

While the three of them had the advantage of Third Mind—the skill the hackers had used to access their real world memories—most of Virai did not have this capability and were sorely lacking when it came to obtaining news and coordinating with each other. Add to that the common distrust inherent in thieves dealing with thieves, and the entire situation seemed doomed from the start.

And unfortunately, despite Paradigm's intentions—true or not—there were likely going to be other players who would not bother to make the distinction between Raen's followers and the regular independents, whether those do-gooders were honestly attempting to "clean up the world" or merely collecting on a bounty.

However, Xaff knew that there had to be something more to the problem. Something even more serious, before Paradigm would have bothered to take action. *The more harmless players, he thought, but surely those new rumors weren't true. They couldn't be.*

"Xaff?" his friend asked, but Paradigm quickly waved the mage into silence. There was more to the problem than this. Paradigm generally preferred to sit back and watch everyone else scurry around, making idiots of themselves. For him to actually bother with taking the initiative to alert other players in regards to the current situation was definitely unusual, almost as unusual as Myriad's sudden departure...His eyes widened in sudden comprehension, as he looked back up to the other thief, still sitting across the room. Paradigm raised his eyebrows.

"We will look into it," Xaff promised, moving towards the door. He paused, hand on the knob, "And...?"

The other nodded. "Convey the basics. There is no sense in wasting time explaining the intricacies, with a few exceptions."

"Oh, by the way," Xaff added, hand still on the knob, "I heard there was a commotion here in the Eastern Quadrant earlier...after our fun in the square." Interest registered briefly on Paradigm's face, but there were no signals of surprise that the younger thief could discern. Taking the ungiven cue, he continued. "Witnesses have said

a group of men—reports vary from five to seven—attacked two females in the alley next to this building. One of the men was killed near the entrance; the men and both girls are nowhere to be found, but it's believed they did escape."

"And...? Who are they? Why are they of concern?" Paradigm asked.

"As for the first, the knife used to kill one of the men was identified as supposedly belonging to Nikil, a fellow Virai, though one apparently more enigmatic than yourself. She's been around awhile, but next to nothing is known about her—not even rumors. No one's quite sure why she showed up here from Oraji, though if the rumors are true about the monsters around there starting to invade the town, then I can't say I'd really fault her for heading as far away as possible. The other female is unknown, but has silver eyes, by all reports.

As for the second, because you just requested information on all attacks on independents not belonging to Raen's little club. As you damned well know know, Virai pretty much comprises most independents."

"Why does that name sound familiar?" Jairo interjected, getting up from his seat. He spat his next words out distastefully, "Bounty hunter?"

"Freelancer, according to her file at the guild hall," Paradigm answered simultaneously with Xaff's knowledge that she "was acquainted with Cless," a friend of the duo. Xaff looked to Paradigm, somewhat surprised. While he had expected Paradigm to have been aware of the incident already, he was intrigued that the older thief's knowledge of this girl was coming strictly from the guild's files, rather than personal knowledge.

"What's the deal with *her*?" Jairo asked, pointing at the girl sitting at the table.

"This is Jelly." Paradigm grinned as the girl's head whipped around. "Look doll, don't glare at me. You won't tell me your SN. Your name's now Jelly."

Shrugging it off for now, the thief passed through the opening, followed by Jairo, who shut the door behind the pair. In silence, they moved towards the stairs, this time side by side.

"I'll explain it to you once I've finished processing it all myself," Xaff promised to Jairo's unspoken question. The mage nodded his understanding. Paradigm had a knack for unloading a wealth of information on the pair and expecting them to sift through to find what was really important. "Hot chick though," he said, and his friend grinned.

At the landing of the second floor, Oeil stood waiting for them.

"Ye spoke wit' him, yeah?" the big man asked, expression grim.

"Uhhh, what?" Jairo asked, his words merging with Xaff's more knowledgeable query of, "Shit. Who the hell did they get?"

"No one yet," Oeil acknowledged, a slight shake of his head sending massive braids flying wildly about. "Got a tip. Zadex at Luna Tower. Got a circle ready while ya were in meetin'."

"Third 'un," he added to the pair, wisely moving to the side as they thundered past him down the hallway.

The second floor of the Pub was slightly larger than the two floors above it, allowing the necessary space to accommodate the two warp areas that lay past the cheap meeting rooms. The two rooms were on opposite sides of the hallway, but they both took up the space of two regular-sized rooms, as they each contained three portals.

The room on the right was the most commonly used one, as it contained the three

open-teleportation devices that anyone could use to warp to another like-device anywhere in Cadence. The portals in the room on the left, however, were more sophisticated. Only skilled mages and a select few other individuals could activate this particular type of portal, which permitted access not only to the common portals, but to the sophisticated set as well.

Jairo reached the door first, slamming straight through it. Hot on his heels, Xaff slipped in behind him, narrowly passing through the gap as the door slammed back from the backlash.

At first glance, both this device and the one across the hall appeared the same. Both consisted of a pattern carved out into the old adobe floor and the ceiling above it. The difference existed in the material used to fill the cracks. The regular portals typically used one of two fillings—albino sand or crystals crushed into a fine powder—while the special portals were designed for use with zaffre—a deep blue pigment that was obtained by heating cobalt ore, a novelty in Cadence—at excessively high temperatures.

The two friends moved into the center of the array etched out upon the floor, between the circle closest to the center and the next one outside of it. Jairo stuck his hands out in front of him, palms down, one on top of the other. Xaff mimicked the action, taking care to ensure that his palms lined up below those of his friend.

The thief closed his eyes as the mage recanted the activation necessary to use the portal, preferring not to witness the eerie golden light that pierced through their hands, uniting the centerpoint of the circles of the top and bottom arrays. An odd humming filled the air around them, and without looking, Xaff knew that the material in the cracks was flowing up to meet that in the top, creating a dense curtain around the two.

The humming grew louder, as the portal's activation grew in intensity. By now, Jairo would have shut his eyes as well in order to avoid being blinded by the light.

At its peak, the hum switched intensities—while it was still technically a hum, it was now so harsh that it could be likened to little other than a deafening roar. Knowing in a part of his mind that it was the wrong stimulus, Xaff squeezed his eyes shut even tighter. Yet even with his eyes closed, the flash of light signaling the climax of the spell still blinded him.

"Luna Tower!" the mage shouted against the wind that had whipped up between the layers of the azure curtain. Yet even though the thief knew that his friend had likely yelled their destination at the top of his lungs, the sound might as well have been whispered.

The winds strengthened even more in intensity, and Xaff felt the crackle of electricity just beyond the safe confines of their portion of the array. Another flash of blinding light ensued, but this time it was followed by a silence almost as deafening as the roar that had preceded it just from its sudden calmness.

The two friends opened their eyes and waited for the remnants of the spell to die back down before turning to face the ominous tower before them.

"Well..." Xaff glanced over at his friend, wanting to sound nonchalant, but knowing he looked every bit as shaken as the mage from the trip through the portal.

"Let's get started. I've a feeling we're in for a Hell of a ride."

2.4 Ambush

"There should be more places like this in Cadence," Xaff commented, gazing up at the tower before them. Jairo could not help but agree. Of all the places they had visited in Cadence, the towers were his personal favorite. Rumor claimed that Luna Tower itself had well over 200 different floors although most players agreed that there were five basic levels—not including the entrance floor—each containing approximately three floors.

Each floor past the lobby also had several different layouts that swapped on a weekly basis. This made the towers very popular areas for long-time players looking for a challenge since there was no way anyone could know which floor plan they would explore on any given week. Not to mention that it was rumored that the tower and her sister, Sol Tower, were programmed with sentience akin to the desert. Unlike the fallen Sol Tower, however, Luna Tower only had one mastermind running it, as its location outside of the desert rendered it beyond the desert's control.

Cautiously, the two friends approached the broad set of steps leading up to the tower. If Zadex was in trouble, then it was possible that there would be lookouts to make sure that no one interfered with the attack on the former enforcer.

At the top of the stairs, Xaff paused before sidling up to the side of the large

archway that served as the entrance. Jairo followed his lead, approaching the other side of the wide arch. Xaff nodded to Jairo and then towards the archway. The mage shook his head in the affirmative before placing his fingers to his eyes and pressing in.

The effect was dizzying, forcing the mage to lean against the wall for several moments before peeking inside the tower. With the alternative vision, any magical auras or traps would glow brightly. Satisfied that there was nothing dangerous—that he could see, at any rate—he pressed his hands to his eyes again. Xaff took the unspoken cue to enter the tower, albeit hesitantly.

"Something doesn't feel right," he said, brown eyes darting around the apparently empty tower. Jairo entered just as cautiously behind his companion. It had been awhile since he had visited one of the towers. The entrance to Sol Tower was the same as this one, aside from the fact that the other lay horizontal in the sands of the Handarashi while the Luna Tower still remained upright. A wide archway served as the entrance, with a set of stairs just inside and to either side of the entrance, leading up to each of the three floors comprising the first level. The entire bottom level was open, with the three floors encircling the wall, almost more like balconies than actual floors. In the center of the room was a large staircase—the only way to reach the next level since the fourth floor had no staircase of its own from which to proceed. In Luna Tower this central staircase led up in a spiral; the smooth rock reminding Jairo of a snail's shell.

"Perhaps she is in one of the other levels," the mage remarked, moving to the staircase. He looked up towards the top of the spiral staircase, so high up that neither of them could see its end, and then back to his friend, who was nodding.

"That would make sense. If they staged an ambush on her here, then they'd risk it

being interrupted easily," the thief agreed and began climbing, hoping as he knew Jairo was that Zadex hadn't entered a private run. If she had, and she finished before they did, then they wouldn't be able to stop any ambush until they themselves had finished.

Jairo fell in step behind. There was a sense of urgency to his steps, only held back by Xaff's cautious climbing. At first he was annoyed at how slowly his friend was moving, until a flicker of movement from the side caught his attention.

"Xaff..." he started, trying to make out what it was he'd seen. The thief kept moving.

"I saw it."

In the next instant, the mage found himself jerked forcibly up past his friend. A loud blast and a yell rocked the staircase. His glasses skittered down his face, and he snatched at them to put them back in place. Shakily, he turned about to find a hole where he'd been standing.

"Xaff!" he shouted, panicked. Peeking over the edge, he could make out his friend laying on his back looking up at him from the spiral portion below. "Are you all right?" he asked, before realizing how stupid the question was. He was a mage, not a cleric; but he was still fairly certain Xaff's leg shouldn't be bent at that angle.

"Hell no!" the thief spat before grimacing in pain. Noise from above caught their attention.

"Shit, reinforcements!" he called to Xaff in annoyance. "Stay put. I'll be back."

"Like I have a fucking choice!" his friend called back up.

Ignoring the urge to find a way down to his friend, Jairo instead turned his attention to slipping up the staircase without being spotted by whoever was standing on

the perimeter floors. Another blast rocked the spiral above his head.

"Keep your head down, you fucking blockhead!" Xaff yelled.

* * *

Kiwi did not want to be there. She did not want to be standing between Paradigm and Colon. She did not want to be forced to remain in contact with the thief. She did not want to be at Luna Tower, and she did not like being cut off from the Psyche.

And speaking of the Psyche, nor did she understand why Colon had not removed the modified EMP, even after she had rolled up her sleeves in pretense of the heat so as to make it visible. Until it was removed or the thief killed, she would not be able to stray far from Paradigm's side.

Paradigm. Who still insisted on calling her "Jelly" even after Colon had called her by name.

"Keep your head down, you fucking blockhead!" a voice yelled from inside the tower.

"Xaff," Paradigm identified, shaking his head. "Fine. What do you want?"

Colon pointed at Kiwi, and her eyes widened, relieved at the thought that she might be free of both Paradigm and Colon soon since the latter would leave her with Nikil. "Keep her away from Noroh." The girl stared at Colon, open-mouthed. *Seriously? He's really just going to leave me here with this guy?*

"The insane boy?" Paradigm asked. Colon nodded the affirmative. "Hm, no deal. I don't do body-guarding in exchange for information."

Colon raised his palms up in a shrugging manner, seemingly unperturbed by the response. "Then cut her loose."

"Fair enough," the thief nodded, walking up the steps of the tower. "Come along Jelly. Let us go rescue my errant apprentice."

Kiwi hesitated, turning back towards Colon. As soon as the thief's back had turned, his eyes had narrowed in surprise at the thief's intention to keep Kiwi. Even so, he ignored her and stalked back towards the portals. The tingle of electricity from the modified EMP crept along her skin, making the choice for her. She glanced back once more before entering the dimly lit gloom of Luna Tower; Colon was nowhere in sight.

Realizing she would be in danger if she kept her attention divided, she decided to focus on the situation ahead which would entail keeping close to the thief. Movement heading up the stairs to the left caught her attention, and she made for it, hoping it was the thief and not a member of the ambush party.

Paradigm worked quickly and skillfully. With their attention turned on their hapless victims caught in the staircase, the attackers were paying little heed to anyone coming up the stairs on the side. Kiwi considered herself lucky to have sensed the thief's presence when he had ambushed her in Laeru, as she wasn't sure any of the fallen here would ever even know how they had died.

With the thief making quick work of any obstacles, she approached the railing in an attempt to spot Xaff and Jairo in the center of the room. A large chunk of the spiral staircase was missing about halfway up, and some way beyond that, sparks flew from spell after spell.

Beyond the staircase, she could just barely make out movement on the other side

of the hall. *More ambushers?* she wondered. Their identity was suddenly made clear as a bolt of electricity shot across the room, slamming the girl against the wall. From her peripheral vision she noticed a man hurrying down from another flight of stairs leading up to the third floor of the lower level, heading her direction, spear drawn.

Acting purely on defense, Kiwi threw her hands up, searching desperately for water she could shape from the surrounding air.

* * *

As they approached the tower, Alerym could hear the sounds of combat coming from inside. Nikil motioned for her to approach from the side of the large archway, then peeked around into the large room.

"Stay close," the other girl advised, ducking inside and crouching herself into a smaller target. Nikil paused for a moment once inside, hesitating between the two staircases leading to the perimeter walls, then quickly darted up the one to their left. Alerym followed warily, not sure what to expect in her first real combat situation. At least, her first real fight where she wasn't starting off as a hostage. She didn't see any bodies on the ground, just stains of what she assumed were blood.

"KIWI!" Nikil suddenly shouted, breaking into a run, and Alerym saw what Nikil had just seen. A young male stood with his face encased in water; his legs trapped up to the knees in earth. Paradigm stood over a girl sitting against a wall, who appeared to be in shock. His knife was still drawn despite the lack of existing threats in the vicinity, and his attention was focused on the girl.

The thief turned to regard the two girls at Nikil's shout, looking somewhat surprised to see them.

"Kiwi, what happened?" Nikil asked, dropping to the other girl's level and shaking her by the shoulders. The other girl kept her eyes on the man's head, encased in water. Alerym followed the gaze, and it was only then that she noticed the man was still alive.

"N-Nikki," she stammered, pointing at the half-drowned, half-buried man.

"You're a friend of this dualist?" Paradigm said, accusation evident in his tone.

"All dualists must be eradica..."

"Oh for elements' sake!" Nikil exclaimed, rounding on the thief. "Spare me. Can't you do something useful and just get rid of that creepy half-corpse?"

Paradigm started at the girl's tone and orders but obliged to Alerym's surprise. The dying body lingered a few moments longer before succumbing to the poison on the thief's blade, fading from view and leaving no traces behind other than the hollow stone encasements that had ensnared his feet.

Nikil was still trying to snap Kiwi out of shock, without much success.

"For starters," she said, turning her attention from Kiwi to Paradigm for the moment, "I've known this girl since she started playing. She's not a hacker, and she shouldn't be a dualist. She's a mage, and not even a good one at that. Hell, I'm not even sure if she knows how to use a computer in the first place."

"So you have the Third Mind, then?" Paradigm responded, switching gears, but still accusatory.

"Yeah, and so do you. I won't ask how you got yours; you don't ask how I got mine. Fair enough?"

The thief nodded, face impassive, but didn't sheathe the knife he had loose. Nikil rocked backed on her heels.

"It's no good. I can't bring her out of it."

"Move," Paradigm said, forcefully moving the girl away. "Hey, Jelly. Fair warning here. Come out of it, or you're going to hurt." Paradigm raised his hand, and Alerym darted forward.

"W-wait a second," she protested, but Nikil caught her arm and held her back. The thief held his arm in the air for a few minutes. There was a glow, and Alerym realized he was pulling something from his inventory, not slapping the girl. "What is that?" she asked, only able to tell that it some sort of root.

"It's a plant for bringing people to their senses who have been charmed or knocked unconscious," Nikil explained.

"But, he said it was going to hurt her!" Alerym protested.

"Nrrraugh, that reeks!" Kiwi complained from the floor, knocking the plant out of the thief's hand, before putting her own up to steady her head.

"Well, it'll give her a nasty migraine, but it only lasts a few moments."

Kiwi looked up at Nikil. "I've never...I couldn't...And then he was just, and it was a hundred times worse."

"It's not like he would have died," Paradigm rolled his eyes. "He'll be back tomorrow unless he was on his third strike. Now what do you wanna do about them?" he asked, pointing towards the center staircase.

"You're the strategist; you tell us," Nikil glared, moving to stand next to Kiwi.

Paradigm eyed the three girls. "We still have the ones on the other side to clear

out before we can reach Xaff and Jairo. Otherwise, we'll all end up stuck up there."

"They'll know we're coming now, though" Nikil pointed out. "Between Alerym and Kiwi, I think they can keep themselves covered well enough to start up the stairs."

"A decoy while we take out those on the other side?" the thief mused, and Nikil nodded. "That could work," he agreed. Turning to Kiwi, he cut a small band from her arm.

That would be an EMP; like what Colon and I were discussing earlier. Nikil explained to Alerym over the Psyche. *Not sure how she pulled an element through that though; her water should have been blocked by an EMP.*

Where did the earth come from? Alerym asked.

I guess he was an earth elementalist. Those yellow stripes marking the band mean she would receive shocks if she got too far from Paradigm. He must have grounded himself, thinking it was a spell.

So she's not a sage then? Alerym asked, thinking back to the lesson she had received from Nikil and Il'iko earlier.

If she is, she's never shown any signs of it before. Of course I lied about the water. She's had that since we met.

"You remember how to call the magic from that staff we bought earlier, right?" Nikil asked Alerym, stating the question aloud. *If we never say anything, he's going to get suspicious, after all.* The blue-haired girl nodded. Paradigm ushered them to move down the stairs and back towards the entrance.

"Wait..." Alerym said, stopping. Something was different, but she wasn't entirely sure what it was she was feeling. "Something doesn't feel right," she said, hoping that

would suffice.

"What in the Hell is that supposed to mean exactly?" Paradigm asked, but Nikil held up a hand.

"Isn't it a little quiet up there?" she asked.

"That's what it is," Alerym confirmed. "I can't feel them up there anymore."

The thief shrugged off the news nonchalantly. "Well, we might as well do the run while we're here."

"But they're your friends!" Alerym was taken aback.

"No. It's my student and *his* friend. And they will both be back in 24 hours. No point in worrying about it now."

"I'll call the truce then," Nikil said, equally unperturbed. "That'll prompt the tower to start the no-combat period and fix the access stairs."

Alerym looked from Nikil to Paradigm to Kiwi and was surprised that of all the faces she looked to, it was the latter who seemed just as shocked by this turn of events as she was.

Kiwi shrugged, not really having any explanation for the behavior of the other two party members. "Welcome to Cadence?"

3.0 Epilogue

"Her. Unlock her file."

Frank glared down at the detective sitting next to him and rolled his eyes. She had obviously not listened to a word he had said over the phone before ordering him over to her hotel at the god's ass crack of dawn. He had been up all night editing her character into the system per the previous request, so she could investigate in-game as well. It had taken some time to sort through forcing a non-moderator character to be permitted Third Mind without granting her access to the same abilities the administrators did.

The file highlighted in blue on the screen in front of him read 5465726166696e. The detective had avoided expanding the details of the file in order to prevent him from seeing which player's file she was investigating. He glanced at the clock in the bottom-right corner instead: 9am. Lords was it early. Why did it have to be so goddamned early?

"As I already told you over the phone, any locked information is locked. You can't get to it. Ordering me here accomplishes nothing. Besides, it's not like I can access the files without your permission right now anyway. Isn't that what they decided?"

"They *also* decided on your full cooperation with this case. This player could be an important witness in breaking this wide open!" she countered, voice tight with an

irritation she was not bothering to conceal.

"This *is* my full cooperation. It's locked. You can't open it. I can't open it. That lock next to the account means she was put in our server's version of a 'witness protection program' or Hell, maybe she was banned or hit her three strikes in something controversial. I don't know. All I do know is that her old account would have been locked. You know, because it has a *lock* right there?" *Though if you want to sort through every single goddamned locked account we've got for this server, you can be my fucking guest. Keep you off my back for a while.*

"You expect me to believe that you can't unlock her account. That you can't give me a name, age, address, or if she's even in the government funded version of the program!"

"Honestly? I can't even tell you if she's a she."

"Bullshit. And you can't tell me who her current character is."

"Well, that would defeat the purpose of a protection program if that's the case. That pink lock next to the label means she falls under Dawn's jurisdiction which means that I don't get to see anything at all about what becomes of her. I couldn't even tell you if she's still playing."

"Then perhaps I should just notate in my report how uncooperative you've been now that I've finally got a lead. I believe you did agree to render all possible aid to..." The developer waved her silent before she could finish.

"Don't twist what was said. I agreed to your demands that I not access the player list, and that I give you all access to it. What you have access to is what I have access to. If you can't access something in those files, then I can't get to it either. Short of breaking

into the Connors household while they're in mourning and hacking Dawn's computer—which I couldn't do even if I wanted to—I can't access those files. Our locks require both the correct physical address and the correct passkey. I removed that security on my end at your request. I can't undo hers."

"Bullshit. You're telling me that no one can tell me who that girl really was nor who she is now?"

"No one sane."

Or so he had said. The detective had kicked him out of the hotel room in a fit of barely controlled rage. Well, it wasn't his fault that she wasn't as good at interrogating people in the online world as she was in the offline version. Though, he really didn't think she was that good at it in the offline world either. He halfway wondered what her superiors would think if they heard that sailor mouth of hers. Might almost be worth recording her and getting her kicked off the case, except that then he might end up stuck with someone competent.

After all, he was a programmer. Did she really think he couldn't decode a small string of hex like that? Even a novice computer user could pull that off. Granted, she had to be doing something right though, to keep solving cases.

Then again, maybe the whole problem just boiled down to them underestimating those involved in the project. They didn't just come out of there knowing how to swing a sword or an axe like everyone thought. Each of the worlds required an entire set of citizens on the other side. Merchants, politicians, teachers, parents, civil servants...they were all there, in some capacity. A programming politician. Bemused, Frank leaned on the railing and glanced down into the hotel's lobby.

"Excuse me. Sir?" Frank glanced over at the bellhop. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but...aren't you Mr. Brant?"

"That depends." Frank answered wearily. "Are you going to tell me my game is ruining society or that it is an amazing technological innovation? Because I don't really care for either of the two at the moment."

"No sir. I just wanted to say thank you for giving some of us a chance when no one else would."

"You're a GPT?" the admin asked, referring to the government program turnouts who had been placed into transitional positions in the real world after undergoing training in the game. The bellhop nodded.

"Thanks to you and Miss Connor, I was able to have food in my stomach every night. They arranged for this job when I finished. It's nothing fancy, but it's paying the bills until the next bar exam. My wife is a GPT, too; she'll be a teacher when she finishes. We donate whenever we can. We know you guys can shut down that hacker who got Miss Dawn."

"What server do you play?" Frank asked, brow narrowing. Word hadn't gotten out yet through the media about the accident at the Connors being about Dawn or Melissa, only that one of the sisters had died. So if this boy suspected that Dawn had died, that meant he knew about Myriad's disappearance from the game which meant..."You play Cadence, don't you? Do you belong to Aldarone? Never mind, don't answer that. How many players would you have to go through to get a message to Colon?"

"One. Nikil."

Frank crossed his arms and leaned backwards against the railing, exhaling deeply.

He knew the detective was no friend of his and was looking for any excuse to shut down the game and its co-existing government program; but at the same time, Colon had murdered a long-time friend and ally of his. At the same time though, there was the urgent need to track down this missing witness before Davis found her.

"Oeil's Outlet. He can choose the room. All available Zodiac Enforcers will be present. He can bring whom he will as long as Nikil comes with him. And tell him to bring that girl from the last time we met, too. Alive."