

A Welcomed Invasion
by Andre Monserrat

I awoke with Phoebe's spine mashed against mine, bonded briefly by sweat, splashing out of a dream where I had been awarded a conjoined twin at the supermarket checkout. For three seconds it was a real situation and I jerked away to snap us apart. She stirred and muttered, her hair sliding further under the sheets, a bed anemone. My hand slid along the cool cotton as the morning started to take root. The milestone meeting was today. I had my sitrep memorized like a slam poem, off book, hitting all the right beats in three minutes or less.

I pulled my phone from the nightstand, a compulsion, not really needing anything from it now except to briefly caress the realm of swimming pixels. I had set a reminder for the milestone meeting, in case of blunt head trauma. The phone started to ring. Dream Theater's "Pull Me Under." Phoebe's ring. In moments I slid out of bed and stood just outside the door to her bedroom, pulling it almost closed.

"Hello?" I asked, my voice crackling with morning phlegm and caution.

"Morning, Martin," said Phoebe.

"Phoebe?! Wha..." I said, my voice amplified in the hallway.

"Shhhh, you'll wake me up," she warned.

I stared through the cracked doorway. Phoebe had rolled onto her back, mouth slightly open, hair in a spray that made me think of the Birth of Venus on the cover of the old Adobe Illustrator boxes. She started to snore as she always did when she slept on her back, a croaking swamp sound. "I just had this dream about barnacles and the Kon-Tiki and I think it means we need to start seeing other people."

I retreated out to the kitchen so I could freely turn up the volume on my retort. "What? Are you saying I'm a barnacle and I'm somehow latching on to your life's forward momentum?" I pulled the orange juice out of the fridge and drank right from the jug. That'll show her.

"No, you weren't even in the dream. Well, there was a seahorse that I thought maybe was you, but it turned out to be Aziz and then later, it was Beau." Phoebe advocated a philosophy of radical honesty, never getting stingy with the truth about the upper planes she visited while riding the crests of the orgasms gifted to her by former lovers. Especially Aziz, the one I had mentally tagged "The Snatch Sorcerer."

"The seahorse is a transitional agent between two states and it's really important that I follow its guidance."

"So you're in transition," I said. "Okay, so I want you to know that I respect what you get from your..." oh, what was a non-patronizing word, "channels. But maybe it doesn't necessarily mean we need to see other people. Sometimes this stuff is so, I don't know, mercurial."

"I knew you couldn't keep your boundaries intact for this kind of conversation, Martin." Phoebe reserved "Martin" for special summit meetings regarding the status of our relationship. "Look, once I get out of the shower you probably shouldn't be here. The situation is too fragile for a confrontation."

Shower? I heard the muted shushing of water before I threw open the bedroom door, staring at the conch-like clutch of empty bed covers. "Can't we talk about this?" I said to the bathroom door.

"We *are* talking about this," Phoebe said through the phone. I wanted to bust in there, smash into her with my tongue and my dick, and fuck her against the steaming shower wall. She made me so hot when she got this severe. "I gotta go, I have another call." The line went blank.

I felt so curtailed. My ribs and groin bubbled with a ripple of micro explosions. I almost pushed the lamp over, I was so pissed. I stabbed myself into my clothes, hoping something would rip so that someone at work would ask about it and I could say "You know what? Fuck you and your entire race of fucked up harpies!"

I'd have to shower at work.

I parked next to JC's car, a shimmering teardrop of mercury with understated TRON-like accents and corresponding fuel efficiency. A concept vehicle bestowed on the CEO of our company by another member of the luminous CEO society, one of Garriott's friends. They presumably held court from an orbital platform. The company was trending high and we all had downtown lofts or funky pads in SoCo, but JC Winter's rewards originated from the heart of an alien sun, gifts from his faraway galaxy of origin.

I stuck a red follow up star on my thoughts of Phoebe and her whatever, her dream crisis, for later. Breakfast. Shower. Email. Prep. Milestone Meeting. My morning quest log: updated. I stepped up to Manuel's burrito trailer and smeared a few bills on the hot metal counter. He handed me the usual and dropped my change into a paper cup. We had an understanding.

"So what's the news?" I asked, peeling back the wrapper. Warm and dense, I took the burrito up to my tonsils.

"Love obeys the laws of thermodynamics, my friend," said Manuel, spatula automatically hatcheting the eggs. "Entropy constantly stalks it. Good lovers are also excellent watchmakers."

"Speaking of which, what time is it?"

"Such a technical boy with no watch?" he chastised.

"My hands are full," I said.

"Ah, I see, patrón, I see." The burrito vendor reached under his apron and flipped open something brassy on a fob chain. "It is five until." The watch snapped shut and he ducked down to check the tortillas.

Gotta go. I snarfed another few bites and wiped my mouth on my wrist. "Cut back on the salsa next time, you're killing me here."

"Fire in the belly," said Manuel, emerging again. "This is my prescription for you."

"Later, doc," I said, wadding the last few inches of burrito into a tin foil ball, tossing it at a trash can. Nothing but net. I cut across the morning pedestrian current and into the Beyondist lobby. I nodded at Eileen. Muscle memory snapped her smile into place, her eyes still in screen saver mode. The fossilized faces of dead model smart phones studded the wall behind the reception desk, the Coke bottle mosaic of a consumer century.

I hung a left, up the stairs to the storage room and showered in the converted maintenance closet. I grabbed a schwag shirt, but everything else was from yesterday. Faint smell of sandalwood on my jeans. Damn it, Phoebe, we have something that still floats. I looked down at

the Beyondist logo on my chest. "The Game is Anywhere." It was like wearing a concert T you bought at that concert. Maybe it'll play as building brand ubiquity. Fuck it.

At my cubicle I spun up my laptop and let the emails flow in. The filters went to work, bagging and tagging the spam, company memos, notes from JC, and the never-ending bug reports. Looks like the latest Polygony build was holding steady as predicted. Lots of green tabs. I started to open a message from JC, *re: enCompass - The Road Less Traveled* when Donner hung his chin over the edge of my cube.

"Would you call this yellow?" He held up a macadamia and chocolate chip cookie for my inspection. Donner, our office manager, was on this new diet based on the color wheel. He had pre-emptively sent out a memo which began, "Just in case you're curious about this new diet I'm on..." He provided links. That way we had time to form an opinion about the diet before he shoehorned it into our water cooler deconstruction of the latest Breaking Bad.

"I guess it depends on the lighting," I said, not really wanting to get into it.

"How about this lighting? The lighting in the office?" He fanned out some Pantone swatches and cautiously slid the cookie toward a canary yellow. The graphics department should change their locks more often.

"Um, sure. I think it's fair to say yellow is represented in there somewhere. I mean it certainly isn't green, right?" Crumbs had accumulated along the colored strips.

Donner nodded enthusiastically, getting his jowls flapping. "Yes, Marty, I think you're right. Definitely in the yellow family. I was pretty sure, but a third or fourth opinion helps. Thank you, Marty." Donner trundled away. That cookie wouldn't last the trip back to his office.

Okay, back to it. The email would have to wait. Shower took a slice out of the morning routine. I popped open my sitrep outline for the meeting and looked it over one last time to make sure I hit all the waypoints. For once I wasn't the bearer of bad news. No real news at all, in fact. We were already patching Polygony, the social media hooks were in the next Brainbow update, and everybody was still jizzing over enCompass and craving the 2.0 release.

Sometimes I had the easiest job in the world: making sure people enjoy their smack. The rest of the time I was cracking a whip down in the smack mines. So far we had only delivered top shelf product, bar raisers that needed an extra star on the game review sites because now 5 felt like the new 4. Companies who came out of the gate with retreads of Flash games, match threes, bullshit knock-offs, they got amnesty. They were settling down into their niche, coasting on a long tail casual consumer base starving for mediocrity. Factor ADD and microtransactions into the business model and these studios could float for ages. Reviewers threw their designs a 2.5, a 3, for not crashing at the load screen and maybe holding their attention longer than a box of rocks. But when you're Beyondist, up here on the mountaintop, there is no mercy. Want to start some shit? Want to blast page views on your blog? Give one of our games only 4.5 stars and make sure you turn comments *on*. The people *love* our games. We have our own zealots and fanboy stalkers and secret menus at our favorite restaurants. All that. The reviewers say they can't wait for the next big thing, the new hotness. But what they really want? What they are hoping for deep down is the train wreck. Our success is an affront to their world view, a league they can never hope to play in. They want to see us topple in slow motion and come bouncing down the mountainside in chunks.

The crucible of the Quality Control Department must be pure and unforgiving.

Let's do this.

No one wanted to be early or late for these meetings. We in the upper echelon of Beyondist had mastered the art of expressing the ladder climber pheromone and suddenly coalescing into nonchalant groups with a vague inclination of heading towards the conference room.

The smell of resurrected Frito pie heralded Bainley's arrival to the convoy now proceeding down the hall. Today he had on a "Spooge Pirates" shirt from whatever tent-maker he commissioned to cover his Hindenburg-class girth.

"Do you even need to be at this thang, Marty?" he asked, eyebrow arched. "Can't you just IM us with BEYONDIST IZ TEH AWESUMZ?" JC had essentially kidnapped Bainley from Google's user experience team, something JC described as a necessary career intervention. Beyondist had a special deprogramming retreat for new employees hired away from a short list of companies demonstrating "significant memetic gravity." Those guys came back to the office looking like they hadn't just wrestled each other's inner demons, but fucked them until the source code of the universe shone out their eyes. Maybe they had. How should I know? They signed an NDA.

"Fucking die in a fire," was all I could manage as I upshifted and moved towards the conference room door.

"Nice shirt, ass kiss!" Bainley called after me.

We filed into the room, snatching up scones and coffees, finding a seat around the horseshoe-shaped table and making sure our tablets were synced with the conference server. The horseshoe would have been the perfect impetus for hierarchy, everyone jockeying for position near the head, except that JC never sat down during one of these things. He preferred to lean against the back wall or pace while someone pitched. I glimpsed him talking with Lorraine, the Creative Director, hand on her shoulder. He did the hand thing with everyone. JC disconnected and headed for the center of the horseshoe, Lorraine's eyes following as though watching a gryphon bound into the sky. For a moment she seemed human.

"Okay, folks, thank you for honoring each other's time and respecting the schedule." JC had the same reedy, earnest, soft-spoken voice as the computer science geeks I encountered in college, yet the murmur of the room instantly dropped to zero when he began to speak.

"Everyone please take a moment to get present to the room and your co-workers. Whether you're speaking today or not, I need you to show up. This is our network and the network is strong as long as every node has focus." My first few company meetings, I let this spiel roll past me, like prayers before Thanksgiving dinner. But one day, seemingly at random, JC pulled me to one side, put his hand on my shoulder and started to speak. I wish I could remember what he said because if I could somehow turn it into a song, I could retire off the iTunes sales alone. Afterward I felt like I had been about to throw myself off a bridge without even knowing it, but then I suddenly realized the world had been anxiously waiting for me to return and cure cancer. So, yeah, one Kool-Aid, please. "With me now? Okay, great. I'll be back up here in a bit, but now let's see what Lorraine has to show us."

Lorraine stepped up, all frosty pageboy hair and let's work late tonight skirt. Married to the job, impenetrable and unknowable as a sphinx. She was pretty in a way that made me want to punch a wall. Half the guys in the office had blown up in the hangar bay trying to pursue something extracurricular. No initial approach, no crash and burn, just an aborted mission,

smelling of sabotage. A de-sexualizing force field protected her, icing you off, reminding you that fornication was something the child races did and We of the Augmented State now found bliss in pondering the silicon lattice.

She showed us the logo and supporting art assets for Longo, a game still deep in alpha. JC called her designs “numinous.” Her logos seemed to change as you looked at them, subtly warping into a new form you couldn’t un-see, the original shape tucked away in the subconscious to nag you like a fuzzy song lyric. I looked at this new one on my tablet screen. For a moment it was a hieroglyph from an Egyptian satellite dish, then it resolved into a stylized DNA ladder. The hieroglyph used to mean...to mean...fuck. Well played, Lorraine.

Her graphics scrolled by and she spoke, but I couldn’t focus because I was up next. I knew I was supposed to listen, to “be present,” but I couldn’t be on my game unless I slid into it with momentum.

The green light blinked on my screen. I got up and approached the center, brushing past Lorraine as she headed back to her seat. She smelled like sexflowers. I held back a sneeze. I stood there inside the horseshoe for a beat, taking in the faces. Most everyone looked genuinely attentive. Bainley was practicing Force-choking me while keeping his expression completely disengaged.

I brought everyone up to speed on Polygony. The testers had zeroed in on the problem area and we were 99% certain the patch would clear it right up. Everyone nodded. JC leaned against the back wall, staring at the floor, but I could feel him listening. On to Brainbow. Again, no surprises. The social media APIs were going to play nice with our code. I expressed my concern about losing direct control of the user experience as parts of the game would now poke into a third party’s playground. Shrugs and muttering. Not really in my job description to speculate.

“So that was the cake. Here’s the icing. The success of enCompass cannot be overstated. Customers beg for the 2.0 release daily. So I’ve been pushing my team to crush the last few bugs. I’m pleased to report that it looks like we may be a week ahead of schedule, maybe even two.” This caused a stir, but not an excited one. I was getting suspicious, uncomfortable looks. Didn’t they believe me? “Uh, of course this is all contingent on whether or not we can resolve one of the most egregious bugs that keeps coming up. Some testers have reported that the Princess Saturday NPC suddenly behaves as a hostile and actively threatens the Thorn Knight. In some cases she has successfully killed the Knight without triggering a lose condition. The tester’s score actually rose.”

Dead silence. Then the bomb.

“That isn’t a bug,” said JC. “That’s a feature.”

The room seemed to tilt slightly. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Did you not read the memo? I put a lot of time into what I felt was a clear communication on the new direction I want to take enCompass.”

Oh, *shit*.

They were all murmuring, shaking their heads. I wanted to look down and see that I had no pants on. I wanted to open the door and see the hallways of my high school.

“JC, I saw it this morning, but I got so focused on the meeting and...” Fucking Donner and his diet distracted me.

“I posted it last night, Marty.” And just like that I understood which world I belonged to. I

worked hard. I cared about my job performance. But at the end of the day, I hung it on a coat rack before I stepped outside into my real life. Most of the other people in this room belonged to a different world. One where Beyondist wasn't confined to an office building, but was instead a porous lifestyle entity, permeating all it touched. In such a world, being up to date on late night missives was an accepted fact of life. "Everything is still perfect, Marty. Just get up to speed after the meeting. Okay, Bainley, what have you got for us?"

I don't remember walking back to my chair or sitting down. A background process handled that. The whole conference room receded behind a hazy membrane. I didn't care who was speaking or if I was "present" or not. Numbly my fingers swiped around the tablet screen, which now felt heavy and awkward. I pulled up my mail and started reading *enCompass - The Road Less Traveled*.

Hey, Everyone.

Back from a bit of skinny dipping near the shores of dream-time. I come to you not as your CEO, but as a fellow explorer. I want to tell you about a journey I hope you will take with me. At Beyondist we've worked hard to create non-ordinary game experiences, to elicit not just fun, but joy. We strive to eliminate as many barriers as possible between the game and gamer, to initiate a welcomed invasion of our ideas. Keep that concept close and take a few more steps with me.

The success of enCompass has become a barrier to its potential. Okay, maybe that was more of a jump than a few steps. The people expect exponentially more from sequels to the things they adore. And this expectation is rarely satisfied. We can all think of examples, both inside our space as well as other media spheres. Am I saying that Beyondist is not up to meeting these expectations? That *you* aren't up to it? Absolutely not. What I'm saying is that these expectations have informed our own design process. Of course we want to listen to the fan base, accept feedback. But enCompass is a peculiar creature. It wants something from us and from the players. We haven't been good stewards. We haven't been listening. Instead, we put ourselves first and became more concerned about how we would be perceived when we released 2.0. Is the latest build solid? Yes. Would it be well received? Sure. But would it be the best thing for enCompass? Would it be what the game wanted? No. enCompass wants to be free. 2.0, as it stands now, is just a shinier set of shackles.

A few more steps. This is one of those "ask forgiveness later rather than ask permission first" situations. Instead of completely re-tasking every team to pursue this new vision, I hand-picked a few of you to work with an outside group of playtesters (also highly trusted) on a fork of enCompass. I needed to gauge the workability of what I had seen in my head without wasting your time on what might have turned out to be my own indulgence. How did it go? "Promising" is a word I could use if I had some doubts and I needed to manage expectations. But I'll go ahead and use "phenomenal." I think you're going to get just as excited as I did when you see the field reports.

Everything you've done so far on 2.0 has not been in vain as there is a significant amount of shared code. Some of the incidents flagged as bugs or exploits will actually serve as new features. Over the next week I will be meeting with key team members to go into specifics and get your take on the revised design doc. I just ask that you stay brave and curious and listening. Together we're going to accomplish something profound.

That's all for now.

Thanks,
JC

An "outside group of playtesters"? What the fuck? And who had JC hand-picked? Was Bainley in on this? Probably. Were there members of my own team who had been working in secret on this thing? Why wasn't I brought on board with this cabal?

I resurfaced into the meeting. Bainley was still holding forth on augmented reality hooks or some shit. I wasn't interested in anything the conspirator had to say. Why was anyone even paying attention to this guy? Bainley paused as the conference door room opened and Phoebe stuck her head in.

"Oops, wrong daydream! Sorry." The door closed and she was gone. Everyone looked back to Bainley, who continued. What was she doing here? Did she want to dump off my things in a public place where I wouldn't cause a scene? I dug into the armrests to keep myself in my seat. I couldn't leave this meeting for anything less than a nuclear strike on the capitol building, not after my fuck up. As far as the company was concerned, my hall pass had been revoked.

I languished through Stanton's tour of the new features in the latest point release for the intra-office groupware. I imagined Phoebe going through my desk, claiming things. Any passersby would pay her no notice. Whenever a social convention got in her way, Phoebe just fanned it into smoke with a claim about how Bedouin culture endorsed her activities and so-called civilized behavior was just a mutated survival instinct run rampant. Apparently the majority of my viewpoints had been factory installed by the Monotheistic Capitalist Patriarchy. She could only shake her head in pity, hoping for a day when I would ascend.

"Thanks, everyone. That's it for now," JC was saying. "Let's get back out there and do great things." While my coworkers leisurely got up, I launched from my chair and hustled out the door, my tablet swinging at my side like an oar. I had an accusing finger and a cry of outrage queued up, but there was no sign of Phoebe at my desk or anywhere in the office. I put down my tablet and fished out my phone.

Right to voice mail.

"You have reached Phoebe and Aziz. We are presently experiencing bliss and don't remember things like phones any more. You can still say something enlightened at the beep, though. Beeeeeeep!" Aziz?! The Snatch Sorcerer?

"Phoebe, I don't know what you were doing..." I started to say.

"Hi, Martin," said Phoebe.

"This isn't your voice mail?"

"It's like voice mail, but more efficient. It screens my calls and has conversations on my behalf," she explained.

"Wait, what's this about Aziz?" How long had this been going on?

"My wonderful husband! We've been married for about five years now."

"What the hell are you talking about? You've never been married!" Another link in the Patriarchy's "chain of oppression."

"I went back and changed it."

"*Changed* it? What does that mean?"

"Yeah, and you and I never met, so I probably shouldn't be talking to a strange man on the phone. Bye!"

I hit redial and got a message saying the number was no longer in service. Fuck!

"You know the guidelines about personal calls, Marty." Donner insinuated into my cubicle. Cookie crumbs speckled his tie.

"Yeah, well what about *impersonal* ones?!" I shot back with a glare.

"Hostile work environment: check." Donner's sister was at law school and he had become her first disciple. He slunk away.

I could have let this whole thing slide if she hadn't brought up Aziz. When could he possibly have reappeared? Last I heard, he was touring Bali with a troupe of throat singers. Besides, things between them were *over over*. Phoebe had to be playing a game with me. It wasn't the real Aziz, but an idealized avatar, some dream thing decanted from the ether to offer an impossibly perfect relationship. Or maybe she had just named her vibrator after him. I had to go confront her. Maybe I could take an early lunch.

An IM popped up on my laptop screen. *JC: My office, when you have a chance.* Meaning "right now." Better just get this over with. I went down the hall and knocked on JC's door. Under the name plate "JC Winter" someone had stuck a bumper sticker of a wolf leaping beside the snow-encrusted phrase "Winter is Coming." Cute.

"Come," he said and I went inside. JC was cross-legged on a beanbag chair rather than behind his desk. So it was to be one of *those* tête-à-têtes. He gestured for me to sit and I crunched into the chair opposite him, the small in-floor rock garden dividing us. A Michael Parkes painting hung on the wall behind JC, a gargoyle leaping to catch a soap bubble blown by a young girl. He had levelled up from the Dungeons and Dragons posters that most likely adorned his college dorm walls.

"I'm really sorry about earlier," I said. "I should have prioritized the memo and set aside more prep time so I had been more focused." I hoped that was the right thing to say.

JC pushed his glasses up towards his gigantic brain, shaking his head. His ponytail glowed beatifically in the sunlight. "That's not what I wanted to talk to you about." He stared into the pattern of stones in the garden, saying nothing. I looked at the stones too, searching for a message. He wasn't upset with me and I found myself disappointed. I wasn't important enough to get mad at. "A few months ago I was shopping at Whole Foods when I noticed this guy, young man, 20s, wandering through the aisles. Once in a while he would attach a sticker to a candy bar, a box of pasta, a juice bottle, what have you. Powder blue stickers with a thumbs up icon and the words 'I Like This'."

"Like on Facebook," I said. JC and Zuckerberg had dinner whenever "Zuck" was in town.

"Exactly like on Facebook," JC said. "I left my groceries and followed him out to the patio where I observed him approaching people, random strangers, and putting these stickers on them. Liking them. He gave me two. A fan, I guess. A lot of people went along with it, but some folks were clearly bothered. Eventually a manager came out and asked the guy to leave, which he did without protest."

"I'm guessing the manager didn't get a sticker," I joked.

"No, he certainly didn't," JC said gravely. He picked up a polished white stone, studied it, put it

back. "Do you think what he was doing was wrong?" His blue eyes told me that he wasn't looking for a right answer, just an honest one.

Hmm. "On the one hand, he wasn't really harming anyone. On the other, he was technically defacing property and disturbing the customers, so I guess Whole Foods was in the right."

"But do you personally think it was wrong, irrespective of whatever rules might be in play?"

"No...I guess I don't have a problem with it."

"Would you apply these stickers yourself?" JC's eyes sparkled behind his glasses.

"Well, no, probably not. I mean, Liking something online is one thing, but..."

"So you endorse his activities, but would not participate yourself?"

"Yeah, that about sums it up," I said, not sure if I had passed the test.

JC nodded. I couldn't tell if he agreed or if I had confirmed his suspicions. "This young man was breaking the rules to a game that everyone, he included, already knew how to play. Yet these rules aren't posted anywhere. They are agreed upon by unconscious consensus. If you asked anyone there at Whole Foods to tell you who decided that it wasn't okay to put Like stickers on people, the person would tell you about They or Them. It's the Anthill Paradox: each ant claims it didn't build the anthill; it was all the other ants. Every ant says the same thing.

"The man with the stickers imposed his reality, his hacked rules set, on top of the consensual one. And he found agreement with many people there. He found it with you and me. We immediately subscribed to this new viewpoint because it appealed to something already inside of us. It just *felt* right.

"How many of these rogue game modes are there? How many private realities are waiting to find consensus? Those questions were gifted me by this young man and indeed I kept them close for some time afterward. And then, as often is the case, I found the answer in dreams. The specifics are irrelevant. Suffice to say, enCompass came before me, pleading for its freedom to become what it wants to be: the interface through which we cultivate and curate these other points of view. Players won't be making decisions to advance their progress in the game. Their decisions will advance their progress in *this* game." JC gestured with his hands to include the room, the building, Austin, everything.

JC must have seen something in my face because he reigned it in, dialled things back down to the prime material plane. "I know, it sounds woo-woo. But when you see the field reports, I promise this is all going to crystallize, Marty."

"Yeah, about this group of playtesters..."

"Marty, what I need you to get is that this thing is beyond you and me. We have to become good stewards of this idea and do our best to help it grow. For that to happen, I need your complete, 100% buy in on this."

"Of course, JC, you got it, but..." I didn't notice him set the rhythm and now I was missing all the beats.

"It's not the hours, it's not the progress reports, it's not how well you manage your team. Player records show the last time you logged any time in enCompass was two weeks after initial release, almost six months ago. You're still level one."

Guilty as charged. "We have a whole team of crack playtesters," I said. "Guys are bug hunting ninjas. They turn up bugs *inside* other bugs. They're better at it than I'd ever be. Me, I can manage them, motivate them. Channel their borderline Asperger's into grinding the builds.

That's what I'm good at. What else do you want from me, JC?"

"I want you to play the game."

Bainley was holding up the wall in the hallway outside. He straightened up as I shut JC's door behind me. I was surprised he didn't leave a grease stain behind him.

"What do you want, Super Size?" I snapped. I needed something visceral to ground me after my tour through the outer rim of JC's perpetual Gedanken experiment. Picking a fight with Bainley ought to fit the bill.

Bainley held up a finger waterlogged with Mountain Dew, an absurdly prim gesture, and consulted his phone. enCompass' listening mode sounded its telltale chime. "Should I stomp Marty into a sticky red paste?" he asked the game in a tone usually reserved for questions meteorological.

"He is truly a knave whose selfish deeds have long gone unpunished," the creaky voice of the Grid Gargoyle said from the phone. "Crush him now. Let his raven-picked husk serve as a warning for other pretenders." Bainley smirked and nodded at this advice.

"Aggression against one so beneath your station will seem as weakness to your enemies," cautioned a voice I had not heard before, cold and female. "Let the gnat pass unnoticed. The rewards are greater, in fact, as this one has been Marked by the Technomancer himself." Bainley liked the sound of that and tapped his phone, smiling at the trill of experience points spilling in.

"Had to go with the Queen of Codes on that one, Farty," Bainley said. "Lucky you. Now out of my way." I stood aside as he marched past into JC's office, an eye-watering miasma in his wake.

Not the grim insult-fest I was hoping for. I went back to my desk, but it no longer felt safe. Phoebe pulled out the rug and then JC pulled out the rug under *that* rug. Maybe I was just getting old, complacent, lacking the agility to adapt to a warping environment. I liked my lists and parameters. Usually I could bend with the bugshit, but JC had pitched enCompass' original design doc out to Pluto. I couldn't even see it from where I stood. On top of diverting the bullet train development schedule I thought we were on, now he wants me to actually play the game. Like a playtester. Like a *consumer*.

Confronting Phoebe'd have to wait. JC's brain dump with all the data on the new build was sitting there in my inbox. I sighed and set my phone to update to the new build. I'd look at JC's data during lunch. I had to get out of here. I locked down the laptop and beat it. Eileen noted my departure like a barcode scanner registering a carton of milk.

I hit the sidewalk with no destination in mind. More importantly I hit it with momentum, focused on my phone, a patented way to clear a path through any pedestrians. Fortunately Austin's sidewalks were generous and relatively unpopulated. I logged in to my enCompass account for the first time in ages, swiping away a bunch of Usage Terms and news blips. A pop-up informed that the Technomancer had gifted enough XP to fast-track me to level 5. Great, so now I was a charity case? Thinking of Bainley's fucking smirk, I readily accepted. Now it wanted me to make

my first choice. I came to a stop near a bench and sat down.

"Where should I eat lunch?" I asked.

On the screen, a cartoony ogre-like character unfolded itself from a black cube. The caption identified it as "The Obsidian Golem." "Stay to the path well-trod," it advised in a gravelly voice. "Visit Jimmy John's once more. Present this coupon for 10% off your order." The Golem winced as a purple ball of light zipped around his head, filling the screen to become Princess Saturday, who was apparently Tinkerbell's indie rock sister. Blue hair and striped stockings. Yow.

"It's time to improvise! The Hideout Theatre has some tasty treats and, duh, it's like right there!" I looked up and the place was indeed across the street. You couldn't find a bar in Austin that didn't have a poster for the Hideout's latest shenanigans. Improv always struck me as a publicly sanctioned breed of schadenfreude where the audience witnessed acts of stylized degradation in an awkwardly small theater. So I always passed.

So far this day had been about me getting burned by keeping it status quo, so, sure, I'll hit up the Hideout. Plus there were more points in it for being a new experience. I selected the Princess. She winked, blew a kiss and flitted away over a hilltop.

I crossed the street and pushed into the coffee shop on the first floor of the theater. The hipster and freak factors were at an acceptable level, mostly college kids peering at their laptops over the rim of their fair trade lattes. The lanky guy behind the counter made it clear to me that he was doing me a big favor by taking my order, a ham 'n cheese croissant and a coffee. I took my coffee to a table near the small stage and waited for my sandwich to heat up.

enCompass was doing an update so I put it in the background while I looked over JC's data. I drilled down to the field reports. I needed to know everything about this splinter cell testing our game. JC was exultant over some kid named Alice, so I tapped her profile. Alice had over twenty video reports along with a dedicated blog. Busy girl. I started to pull down her third video entry. Beyondist sponsored the free public wifi in a several block radius around our building, so the pipes were fat.

"Konichiwa! Another super update from Alice!" The screen was not big enough to contain this kid, so I could only see a big smile until the camera pulled back on a fourteen year-old Japanese girl in a blue raver wig. Big purple anime eyes, contacts obviously, blinked out at me. Maybe a cosplay thing? Something familiar about her, but couldn't place it. "Did you know eC is a big homework helper? Well, it is! My friends know everything about everything, especially lame math. So useful!" A graph zoomed into view. A frowny-faced toon version of Alice indicated her pre-enCompass math scores while a nearby happy Alice rode a rising bar, bursting up through the top of the chart. Cut to fireworks. And she's back. "See? Enrique wanted to borrow my friends for help on *his* homework, but I was like whoah, whoah, whoah. You said all those things about Joy Joy" cut to photo of other girl designated as BFF "and now you're acting all nice? I don't think so!" Cut to clip of Sailor Moon-looking character delivering a boot to a punk's jaw, wushu-ing him into the asteroid belt.

The counter guy dropped my steaming croissant in front of me with a clunk and returned to his post. I looked at the ham 'n cheese. I've had worse. I tore off a chunk.

"Just effin' your eye, Marty," Alice said from the screen. "You totally need to let her sit down!"

BiyeEEEEEE!" What? The video player dropped away before I could rewind.

"Um, hi," said a voice standing next to me. Piercing blue eyes behind horn rims, short skirt and long jacket, blond hair in a severe bun, obligatory Austin tattoo peeking out on her inner left wrist. Yes, please. "Sorry if this is completely weird, but, um, we're both playing the same game."

For a moment I had us both backstage slamming against an invisible improv chaise lounge and then I snapped back. "Excuse me?"

"enCompass? You're playing too, right? Player count went up when you walked in and, while I'm no Sherlock Holmes, I'd like to think my deductive skills are somewhere north of fabulous. Oh, god, its not that dweeb with the laptop is it?" This hot librarian archetype cut me to the quick every time. Threat database listed no known countermeasures, but so the fuck what?

"No, it's me, it's absolutely me," I said, getting to my feet as an archived chivalry sub-process spun up. "Please, have a seat."

"Jewel," she said, sitting down. "Yes, like the singer. Yes, it is my actual name."

"Marty," I smiled, lowering back into my chair. "So, you like the game?" I had my I Work For Beyondist And I Am Hot Shit card queued up, ready to deploy.

"I'm OCD over it, I'm embarrassed to say," said Jewel, producing her phone, metallic blue, something from two years ago. "I let it pick where I have lunch every day. I go where the points are. Sad, I know. And don't get me wrong, as amazing as you might be under, you know, normal circumstances, there was a bonus for coming over here and talking to you. Maybe because you work for them?"

"How did...oh, the shirt, right." I completely forgot about the shwag shirt. Dumbass! "So what kind of bonus will you be thanking me for? A new outfit for one of your friends?"

Jewel's brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure. It's downloading something." She turned her phone so that I could see enCompass updating itself to JC's new build. My chair jellified momentarily.

"Hey, I don't think that's supposed to happen," I said. "That's an internal build and I can't let you..." I actually started to grab for her phone. If this build got into the wild, it'd be my ass.

"Too slow," she said, snatching the phone closer, eyes locked on the screen. "If this is some kind of top secret version of the game, I am totally going to play it immediately." Jewel was scanning through menus she shouldn't see, probably saturated with misspellings and stopgap UI kludges. Things only a playtester should have to endure.

"Seriously, I think maybe your phone accidentally got something from my phone..."

"Like phone AIDs? Are you at least going to pay for my lunch?"

"Consider your lunch covered, complements of Beyondist." I needed that phone. "Every lunch this week."

"Kidding, but thanks," she said, all arched eyebrow and clever smirk. "Should I give my phone to this guy that I just met ten seconds ago?" Great, she was asking the game.

"Girlfriend, what I tell you 'bout these no-account, no respect grifters?" said a voice like Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome era Tina Turner. "You gotta make tracks, honeychil', and leave 'em in the dust!"

"For vonce I must agree with Momma Rae," said a voice that would have been the most racist Transylvanian vampire stereotype if Sesame Street hadn't already cornered that market. "Assume bat form and fly, my exquisite night blossom!"

“Sorry, you got outvoted,” Jewel smiled, getting up to leave.

Somehow my hand was gripping her forearm. I had no plan beyond that. I could feel the attention of the whole room lock on to us. Her eyes stabbed mine.

“Do you know Krav Maga?” she asked.

“Don’t think we’ve met.”

“Let me introduce you!” Then her hand grabbed my face and pushed it all the way to the floor where the rest of my body was already waiting. My dick, suddenly diamond hard, squashed uncomfortably between my belly and the floor. From here I watched her expensive shoes walk out the door as applause filled the coffee shop. *Aaaaand scene!*

Jewel had vanished without a trace, of course, lending fodder to my rapidly building case against her existence in the first place. Better a stress-induced hallucination than a consumer out there in the world with an illicit build of the game. Still, what was she going to do with it, realistically? Reverse engineer it? Unlikely. Worst case I come crawling before JC and we push out a patch to kill it.

Back outside on the bench, I pulled up enCompass to get an opinion on this disaster only to find I had received 200 experience points for “Sharing the Love.” Surely this isn’t what JC had intended. His experiment with Alice and the other rogue testers was one thing, but an accidental public beta was madness. Amateur hour. Maybe other studios could get away with crowdsourcing their quality control and spin it as giving the players a voice in the design. Not us. We invited you to dinner, put a silver plate before you and you ate whatever’s on it because it’s perfect and you didn’t realize how badly you wanted it until that moment. There’s no menu. There’s no substitutions. There’s no fucking BYOB.

I didn’t notice the guy on the bench beside me until I heard the enCompass splash screen fanfare come out of his phone. Musician-looking guy with pork chop sideburns looking at me out of the corner of his eye. On my screen Princess Saturday was pirouetting inside a vortex of stars and hearts, caught in a Dyson’s belly as it sucked up a bowl of Lucky Charms. A guy on a bike stopped on the curb in front of me, his streamlined, insectile head looking from his phone to me and back. A ways down the sidewalk I spotted a few women holding their phones out like divining rods, incoming.

The power button bit into my finger as I shut down my phone. Probably too late. As I walked briskly back to the office a map of downtown Austin rezzed up in my head. Red dots started spreading from a big central X, me, Patient Zero.

Eileen stood behind her desk, facing the cell phone mosaic. “Uh huh, yeah,” she said to no one. I flashed past, banking down the hall towards Bainley’s underrealm of script warlocks and code talkers. Couldn’t be helped. His team held the hammer I needed to come down on this fiasco.

I almost tripped over their bodies as I burst through the door. Bainley and his entire team lay on their backs in the center of the room, heads pointing inward, human spokes in a giant wheel. A beach ball-sized bubble of milky light wobbled in the air above them. One of the programmers craned his neck and blew at the bubble, undulating the surface. Wisps of cottony fibers drifted

down from the bubble and into the guy's mouth.

"Bainley, what the fuck?" was the best I could manage.

"New UI, man," Bainley said, eyes locked on the bubble. "I don't expect you to grok it. It's not *for* you." His team chuckled in synchronicity, like the same ringtone from eight different phones. I saw shapes moving below the bubble's glistening surface, algorithmic lizard faces resonating with partner code locked in my hindbrain. I pulled my eyes away from the messages.

"We've got a big problem," I said, staying on task. "The new build of enCompass is loose in the wild. We need to push out a hotfix right now and kill it." How it got out didn't matter. We could hit that bullet point in the post mortem.

"We needed to expand the data set," Bainley said. He paused to inhale the bubble's wispy gifts. "It was getting too incestuous, recursive, breaking down. Plus the mesh is taking a load off the servers. Don't worry about it, Marty. We got this. Go back to your checklists."

"You're saying that you engineered this?" I asked. "You've turned enCompass into a fucking computer virus! I'm pretty sure this isn't covered in the Terms of Use!"

"It is, actually. No one reads those things. If the people don't want to play, they shouldn't have come to our party." Typical. Bainley and his team never accepted responsibility for anything that happened around here. He could always point to a deadline or user error as the reason behind a failure. They could all just sit here, flipping bits, without concerning themselves with how they impacted the company ecosystem.

I took a swipe at the bubble but it torused around my fist, evading.

"Hey, hands off!" Bainley yelled, crooking his neck to look at me. "You'll taint the stream."

I'll taint *your* stream. I left them behind, weaving back through cubeland. Everyone was yacking at their phones, absorbed in their little worlds. I passed Donner's office, getting a flash of his desk buried under the pillaged contents of a vending machine. He didn't factor into this. A casualty. Moving on. My hand came down on JC's door handle. Locked. Now *this* was a first. JC was always "open door" if he was in the building. I knocked. Nothing. I could hear someone in there, though. And something else. Music, maybe.

Okay, you want me to play the game, JC? I'll play.

Eileen had abandoned her post at reception. The mosaic wall glowed with a hundred low-res phone displays, a real Jeff Minter light show. Then Eileen was staring me down, a big pixelated wall face.

"Hello, Marty," she said, electric swarm voice from a hundred little speakers. "Coming or going?"

"Definitely going," I said, reaching for my phone. Wait, no. It was still compromised. Better idea. I came around the desk, grabbed a pen and went to work on one of the Blackberries, chipping it out of the wall.

"Ow! Hey! That's my face!" Eileen said. I pulled at it, careful not to crack the casing. The last bit of adhesive gave way and it was in my hands. The power cord snapped off as I walked away. Back on the street, apparently now my new workspace in the field. The closest bench was already spoken for by trendy businessman and his new BFF, Princess Saturday. Or maybe it was Alice. Didn't matter anymore. She leaned back to wink at me as I hustled past. I saw a few more of her up and down the street, radiant with positive vibes, dispensing advice to her various companions.

I ducked into an alley and brought out the Blackberry, making sure the GPS functions were switched off before I spun up enCompass. The rogue build, no surprise. I went down my mental list of standard playtester accounts, trying the login until I hit one where the password hadn't been changed. I was now BTRingo99. Level 14.

Location services are disabled. Your friends won't know where you are and enCompass won't be able to recommend local businesses. Would you like to enable location services? **Fuck no.**

"How can I shut down enCompass?" I asked the phone.

"Press the Home button and then select Quit from the main menu," said Princess Saturday. She stepped into the alley and leaned against the wall, blinking coyly. Twinkling stars and hearts orbited her head.

"No, I need to shut down the game everywhere. It needs to stop."

"It sounds like you wish to alter your personal victory conditions," Saturday offered. "Is that what you'd like to do?"

"Yes, alter them." It was a start. I knew I wasn't going to beat this system with spurious logic or a backdoor counter-virus. Nothing was ever that convenient.

"Congratulations! You've been awarded 100 experience points for being the first person to create this victory condition! You're very imaginative!"

"Meaning that no one else wants the game to end..."

"Currently your victory condition has a negligible amount of consensus. If you want to change the world, you'll have to find more agreement. Invite your friends to play! Would you like me to send an invitation to people in your Contacts?"

"No," I said, dejected. Who *wouldn't* want a cute indie rock pixie telling you what to do? How could I win out against that? Out on the street there were even more Princess Saturdays than before. Some emo girl walked by with both the Obsidian Golem and Grid Gargoyle in tow. Other Gargoyles winged their way overhead, flickering when they encountered wireless interference. How could the network even handle this kind of bandwidth? I remembered what Bainley had said about the mesh. enCompass had redrawn the map. The game really was anywhere.

Somehow I had wandered back to the parking lot. I guess I wanted to leave, go someplace where my job description didn't involve managing quality control on a renegade alternate reality. But my car was gone. Or rather, my car was now JC's car. All of the slots in the lot were occupied by mercury teardrops. I wanted my own car, not a deep space probe. I didn't even know where the key went.

"I want my car back," I said. "I liked my car."

"No one else liked your car, Marty," said Princess Saturday, appearing beside me. "It was boring and super bad for the environment." She stroked my replacement car with approval.

"I'm going to find a bus," I said, turning away.

"There aren't any more buses. You'll have to take the bulletrail." The Princess was right. All the buses were gone. People, avatars in tow, boarded lozenge-shaped mine carts which rocketed away through tunnels below Congress Ave. The whole street hazed and pixelled like a dreaming HDTV. The tops of skyscrapers blossomed open, pollinated by the strands of white light drifting down from the floating cloud mesh. The new exponential anthill of emerging trends arose before me, a self-managing organism with hungry boundaries. It obviated the need for

quality control. It wouldn't exist if it were unwanted, if someone had no need of it. I felt the same breed of despair that fell on me when a competitor released a Why Didn't I Think of That? app, effortless in execution, instantly absorbed into the public consciousness. Beyondist had just unleashed the killer app to end all killer apps, the smack that eats like a meal. I had even been chosen to be part of the delivery mechanism. I should be thrilled, jizzing buckets. Instead I filled my head with static, noise to buffer the waves of repercussions, monstrous and unending.

"Patrón! Patrón!" a voice called. Manuel the burrito vendor waved to me from his trailer. My stomach reminded me that, although I had gone to lunch, I hadn't actually eaten anything. I could see Hideout counter guy sneering down at my barely disturbed ham and cheese.

"Give it to me," I said, putting a wad on the counter. "Hit me with the salsa."

Manuel nodded in approval, handing me the usual with a double dose of the hot stuff. My eyes started to water even as I bit into it.

"A vexing day," he said. "This is written on your face."

I chewed. Swallowed. "A fucking strange day, man. I can't even begin to parse it." Manuel nodded, cleaning a spatula. "Are you down with all this? The way the world is going?"

"This is as the tides," he said, shooing away a gremlin dangling from the awning. "Different ships arrive and depart, different flotsam washes ashore. The stories of great civilizations are told in the sand. But it is just a moment, then gone. The ocean is full of these stories always. Should a man live his entire life by the shore, he will never read them all. Too many. The ocean wants for divers. It is then the oldest stories are revealed. Are you a good swimmer, patrón?"

"I can keep my head above water," I said.

"Very good!" Manuel laughed. "Very good indeed!"

"What were you telling me this morning? About the watchmakers?"

"Yes, I said that good lovers make excellent watchmakers. Passion for precise movement, cause and effect, attention to the smallest detail—these traits are shared. An immersion with the creative act so complete one might think 'I once thought of this as my own hand, my own mouth, my own mind, but I see now it is not so.' The watchmaker is only concerned with time when he is not making watches. Time, stories, love—names only. A spoonful of the ocean is not the ocean, even if your spoon is the Pacific. So too time and love."

"And reality?" I snarked.

"The same. When you have mastered it, made its every secret familiar, then you may give it a name. Excuse me, patrón." Manuel turned away to take an order from Savvy Shopper Barbie and her friend Princess Saturday. Both looked like avatars and maybe they were. Maybe they always were.

I finished the burrito, every scalding inch of it. I'd take even the smallest victory from this day. I tossed the foil wrapper into the trash along with the borrowed Blackberry. I switched my own phone back on. Obviously no point in trying to hide from enCompass, to halt its spread. I could almost hear JC explaining that the game was becoming what it wanted to be and this was what the process looked like.

"I'd like to change my personal victory condition," I told enCompass.

"I'm all ears," said Princess Saturday. She was munching on a burrito.

"I'd like to go see Phoebe again," I said. Small victories.

“Done! Go for it, Marty!” said Princess Saturday, a dribble of hot sauce on her chin.

“No bonus points for thinking that one up, eh?”

“Who *doesn't* want to see Phoebe again? I mean...duh!”

Duh. I never figured out why Phoebe was with someone like me. That is, someone from Earth. I suppose when you are a being of infinite patience there's a lot you can overlook. Eventually I stopped trying to puzzle it out and chalked it up to the sex. When we first met, Phoebe said she could travel freely between her past and future selves, like riding a subway. She informed me our sex would be so satisfying that we didn't actually need to have it. But we did, of course. Sex with Phoebe was like eating a lobster while it was still alive: Ultimately worth it for the story alone. She was always careful to call it “fucking” to stave off potential umbilicals of need.

enCompass showed me Phoebe's location. Back at her place. Would Aziz answer the door? He was a reasonable man. We could parley. I crossed the street and hopped on the next bulletrail. Not going to lie: it was pretty great.

I tried my key, just for laughs. The door swallowed it. But the door opened. Phoebe had redecorated since I left this morning, ages ago. I'd call the style ancient Greek by way of Doug Chiang, all gracious arcs, understated and eternal. Every surface white beyond white, blown out radiosity renders from industrial design magazines. Familiar wisps of light bathed the place in soft bioluminescence. By comparison I felt like a walking contamination, my breath an oily fume.

“We're in here,” said Phoebe, her voice everywhere, part of the universal superstructure. I knew she meant the bedroom. Where else? Ever since I woke up I was always heading back there.

They floated above the bed, naked, spines fused, like back to back divers surveying an underwater realm. An ethereal current played through Phoebe's hair, her head nodding slowly in sleep. I looked up at JC, his arms spread in welcome, an ascending angel. He awoke at my approach, eyes rimmed with light. Without his glasses he looked like Aziz.

“You made it,” he smiled. “You followed my instructions. Well done, Marty.”

For all the times I sought his approval I wasn't sure I wanted it now.

“So do I win? Do I get enlightenment or something? What is this all about, JC?”

“I wish I had answers for you, Marty,” he said. “I'm level 56 and there are still secrets to uncover. All I can tell you is that it is important to play the game. Stay brave, stay curious, stay listening.”

“How does Phoebe figure into this?” Her hair fanned behind JC's head in a watery corona.

“Phoebe's been playing this game for quite awhile, as it turns out. Long before I even thought to encode it and name it enCompass. The architecture she's developed...it's breathtaking, it's...it's...”

“Numinous?” I offered.

JC grinned and nodded.

“So now what? I feel like I missed something. A check box somewhere.”

“Totally natural, Marty,” said JC. “That's what makes the game so compelling. You want to make sure you don't miss anything. You want to get it right.”

“Is that even possible?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure it matters. My advice is to press onward. You can recharge here for a bit, but eventually this place is going to push you back out. Why don’t you go into the bathroom and change. Freshen up a bit.”

That sounded pretty good. I needed a shower to wash myself away. I stepped into the bathroom, a perfect multi-panelled cube, and looked at myself in the mirror. I still had that fucking schwag shirt on. No, this wouldn’t do. I turned the dial below the mirror and the silver surface went soupy as a roulette of faces cycled past: JC, Lorraine, Bainley, Manuel...Phoebe. I made my selection from the menu.

Hit *Enter*.

The light glowed warm around me, its soothing hum filling all things. I felt my partner already awake behind me, ideas thrilling up our spine. I thought about Martin. Maybe this time around he would understand. I thought about calling him.

“Hello?” he answered, his voice a distant ember.

“Morning, Martin,” I said.

“Phoebe?! Wha...” he said, already confused. Nevertheless I would still give this process another chance.

“Shhhh, you’ll wake me up.”

- end/begin -