The truth is usually simple.

A lie, well, that's another story.

My mom used to tell me that all magic was just sleight of hand. At some point I started to believe her. That's what growing up is, you know? Everything is mystical beneath the veneer of childhood, and then each tale is unwoven, thread by thread, until all that is left is a pile of yarn. Chaotic and unremarkable.

"When you join the elite rich, there's not much in life that your wealth can't acquire for you. So what do people like me end up wanting? Things we can't have, naturally. As for me, I want to toy with humans, my pieces on a chessboard. I want to put them in a dollhouse of my own devilish design. I want to play God."

~Z

"Let's go!" Nick's voice cut through the blaring alarm. The room was shaking as if hit by an earthquake, while a flashing, red light added to the chaos. On one side of the room, the others hurried back through the entrance as a rolling steel door slowly sealed it off. On the other side, Gary paced erratically, a giant wooden chest occupying both his hands. Between him and the entrance stood the sea of weight-detecting platforms he had crossed earlier, and beneath them nothing but darkness.

"C'mon, what are you doing? Drop that thing!" Nick shouted.

"I can't!" Gary's voice was panicked. "My hands are glued to it or something!" He tested one of the platforms with a foot but quickly backed off. "It's gonna fall in." Nick scanned the room for options and noticed something strange. Symbols on the wall that weren't visible before in normal lighting, like an equation. Meanwhile, Gary lifted a foot to try another platform.

“Don’t!” cried Nick, “hang tight, I’ll meet you halfway.”

“There’s no time, the steel door is already halfway down. I’m going for it.” Gary’s voice was frantic.

“No, no, no, wait, wait, wait!” Nick pleaded, but it was too late. With a leap, Gary landed on the nearest platform with the chest still in tow. As the platform collapsed beneath him, all that could be heard besides the alarm was his terrified scream fading into oblivion, and after what seemed like an eternity, the sound of his body crashing to the bottom echoed throughout the room, his fall and his life ending in ominous unison.

PROLOGUE

The golden sun gazes upon his face each morning, casting its warm light to obliterate the shadows of the night. Invigorating. Nature’s gentle alarm clock.

Even now as he wakes he swears he can feel it. But there is no sun here.

There is no warmth, no light, no solar caress. Merely the facade of it, emanating from a dim light bulb which flickers sporadically.

Nick sits up now, surroundings jarring and unfamiliar. His hands on either side of him make contact with the floor, hard and cold. The room, coated in gray walls of brick, is empty, save for a few cardboard boxes, arranged haphazardly against the wall. But it’s not just the floor that is empty. The walls, windowless, doorless, bare as a bone. No stairs to be seen, not a way out in sight.

No, he gasps, as if the sheer denial would alter reality. He runs his hands frantically along the walls, refusing to believe he is trapped and defenseless.

A moment later his muscles tense up, his breathing quickens, and a jolt of panic sneaks up and washes over him like a toxic wave. He falls to his knees, one hand on the floor, the other over his heart which beats at sprint pace. His vision becomes fuzzy, and his arm in front of him seems like a phantom limb. Time and space appear false, a blur.

Long breaths, he reminds himself. Like a cigarette. *God I could go for a cigarette.*

After a few minutes his body begins to tremble, a sign that the attack is subsiding, the energy expended. Replaced with a different sensation—determination, and anger. How dare someone

put him down here against his will, without disclosing the reason? Just plucked him out of his sleep in the night and caged him here like an animal? Refusing to show their cowardly face and leaving no escape? Oh, but he would escape. He was going to hunt down whatever foolish creature perpetrated this injustice and make sure they understood he was the last man they ever should have fucked with tonight.

He strides over to the stacks of boxes and tears into one. It comes open easily, a bit of dust leaping off the flaps. It is filled to the brim with packing peanuts, and nothing but, no matter how many he removes. He continues his search with the next box, his arm swimming through another sea of styrofoam.

Finally, he forces the final box to vomit its contents onto the floor and this time hears a *clunk*, and he discovers a flashlight. He turns it on and it produces a constant beam for a few seconds, but then takes to flickering erratically.

Damn thing, he swears, smacking it against his palm until it ceases its madness. A satisfying feeling, having some control over something even in a place like this. But as he enjoys the victory, he finds something about it niggling at him. Something like…familiarity. And then he hears it in his head.

Click.

His attention immediately turns to the singular light bulb in the center of the room, which taunts him with its waxes and wanes of light, just as the flashlight did before. The pattern, though—the rhythm of it. Artificial, he is sure. Approaching it, eyes narrowed, he simply reaches out and screws it the rest of the way in.

Click.

All at once the familiar *click* sounds out, the light bulb stops flickering, and behind him the side wall starts to move. He turns to see a zigzag portion of it retract itself further into the wall, away from the room, complemented by the low hum of unseen machinery at work. He doesn't need to wait for it to finish to know what's happening.

The wall reveals a hidden staircase.

He shines the flashlight up the stairs, and what he sees stops him dead in his tracks. Its beam illuminates the door—and something else. A *face*. Or the haunting guise of a face. He creeps closer to the door, a step at a time, each one bringing more focus to the enigma before him. Standing atop the stairs, he realizes that what he thought was a 2D image imprinted on the door is actually a 3D object hanging from the door.

A mask.

A plain mask, all-white, with two small ovals for the eyes and, sure enough, a larger one for the mouth.

He picks it up to examine it, but there is nothing remarkable on the other side. No strap attached to wear it. No writing or label or indicator of some deeper meaning. It is simply concave on the backside, fit for a face.

His face.

~~Original Prologue~~

~~Each morning greets me with a healthy dose of sunshine warming my face—which makes it all the more jarring to instead awaken feeling concrete chilling my blanketless body.~~

~~I sit up, brows furrowed, and look around. A bit difficult to do in a dank, dark room, but I'm able to move around. A glimmer of sunlight seeps in through a crack in the corner of the ceiling. *Is* that sunlight? I stand. I can make out dozens of cardboard boxes, stacked in some disorganized fashion. There is a constant low hum reverberating through the room. And, of course, the frigid, cracked concrete upon which I slept. A basement. An unfamiliar basement.~~

~~My mind begins spinning the hamster wheel, and I initiate the classic scratching of my forearm, feverishly, making raw the skin that already bears the damage of years of the habit. *No, this is definitely not where I went to bed last night. I remember clearly. So why am I here now*?~~

~~Despite my bemusement, I take in the rest of the room, my eyes growing more accustomed. It is fairly large, maybe the size of two bedrooms, extending further in one direction, enveloped by darkness. The side from which the dim light comes has a wooden flight of stairs in its corner - my way out of the unfinished basement.~~

~~I ascend the stairs, which creak and groan under my weight. It is almost completely dark at the top of the stairs though I can just make out the silhouette of the door. With a stretched out hand, I try my luck – locked. My heart sinks.~~

~~"Hello?!" I call, rapping on the door urgently, grabbing the knob and twisting it frantically as if sheer force of will would coax it open. My breathing becomes swift and shallow, heart beat like a drum, and my brain turns on me, pumping my veins with primal fear. Twisting turns to pounding the door, kicking. "HELLO??" *BANG BANG BANG* "LET ME OOOUT!!" - a yell escapes my throat. One last foot thrown into the door, rewarding me with a satisfying *THUMP*. And then I stop myself. Breaths become longer, slower. And I grab onto the ledge for support. *Okay, slow down. It's best I think about this first.*~~

~~Have I been kidnapped? If I have, asking for help from the kidnappers isn't doing me any favors. Announcing I have awakened is the last thing I want to do. Maybe if it's just one guy I could~~

jump him when he comes down to check on me. I have an advantage as long as I have the element of surprise. Unless there are-

Video cameras.

I retreat down the stairs. Though the basement is long, it's not a tall room. Reaching up I can grab what I believe to be wood rafters, and further up I can just brush the point where they meet the ceiling. I survey the walls and ceiling, feeling around for cameras and I use the rafters to anchor myself as I venture towards the dark side of the basement, the low hum in the background becoming louder. As I'm moving, long-undisturbed dust comes to rest on my face and a tangle of cobwebs gathers and clings to my hand. Keeping my other hand outstretched, I eventually come into contact with the back wall and I discover the point at which the hum is the loudest - another door. Also locked.

I fumble back across the room, attempting to wipe the stringy, sticky webs off my left hand. No cameras, at least from what I can tell. I might be safe to take my time and figure out what's going on. Did I do anything unusual yesterday evening? Much as I rack my brain, I remember clearly settling into my bed last night at the usual time, turning out the lights after sipping on a beer and reading a few chapters, falling asleep to the faithful whirr of a fan.

So again, why am I here? Ockham's Razor dictates that the simplest explanation is usually the right one. Maybe this is a prank, or maybe I had one too many last night. But this philosophy exists in stark contrast to my tendency to catastrophize. No, I have no desire to risk gambling my life on what is *probable*. What matters to me is survival, at all costs. Survival first, answers later. With that, I start investigating the nearest of the boxes.

It comes open easily, a bit of dust leaping off the flaps. It is filled to the brim with packing peanuts, and nothing but, no matter how many I remove. I continue my search with the next box, my arm swimming through another sea of styrofoam. Flustered, I make a mess of the room, dumping the contents of each box until one, with some finality, produces something hard and weighted that hits the ground with a few thunks. I reach down and procure the offending item.

A flashlight.

Something stirs inside me. An itching feeling in the back of my head, like I'm forgetting something. Or remembering.

I flick it on, my eyebrows rising in surprise. I shine the beam and really take in the surroundings, the room now better illuminated. The walls are brickwork painted white, the ceiling wooden rafters. The only contents of the room are myself and the pile of empty boxes and packing peanuts. I see the locked door, painted gray, at the no-longer-dark end. Then I look down at the flashlight and my spine tingles. *It can't be.* With trembling hands, I unscrew the lid to the battery

~~compartment, flip it over, and shake, knowing full well what will be released into my palm. I feel the key tumble out, its telltale sun with ten rays inscribed in the bow.~~

~~"What…", I shake my head in denial. My trembling hand pockets the key and I replace the battery lid, shining the beam towards the stairs. At the top, where I illuminate the door, I can now see the exact same symbol that is emblazoned on the key.~~

~~I don't want to believe it, but my eyes do not deceive me. I feel that toxic rush of adrenaline course through my veins, my heart knocking desperately on the door of my chest again, a sweat breaking loose on my forehead. I know exactly what this symbol means. And I think I know where I am.~~

~~Now I just need to know why.~~

Adrienne lingered back as the others exited the room. Nick paused for a moment but decided to follow them out.

"Hang on," she hissed at him. Nick's heart skipped a beat. He spun around; the others were now out of earshot.

"I saw you earlier," she began.

"Yeah me too, I think we were both in the same room for like an hour-"

"Oh, don't bullshit me, Nick. I saw you look for that key. How did you know it would be there?"

"Truly astonishing, the advances in psychology. Now you can glean someone's intentions just by observing them!"

A smirk threatened to play on his lips but he held firm. He knew these games didn't work on her like it did on the others. Adrienne glared at him.

"You have your jokes. You have your charisma. And you have that maddeningly convincing smile, but I know what I saw, Nick. True, it wouldn't be enough simply to *see* you look in there. But to see your face, the look of bewilderment, after you realized the key wasn't there? Now *that*," she paused, crossing her arms—she was the one smirking, "*that* was priceless."

Nick imagined himself taking a deep breath and tried to look as relaxed as possible. "As much as I appreciate the free consultation, I'm happy with my current shrink." He crossed his arms, mirroring her body language.

“Don’t mirror my fucking body language, Nick. You might think I’m just as naive as everyone else, but I know you were expecting to see that key when you looked under there.” She paused, as if to let the accusation sink in. Nick was silent, his gaze as piercing as hers. “I can’t explain why you knew, but mark my words, I’m going to find out. I’ll be watching you,” she said cryptically, and then she walked past him and out of the room.

* * *

[*this should be taking place close to the time all these characters are getting to know one another. It should be established by now that Adrienne is a high-level psychologist.]*

“True, anyone can get away with lying.”

“Not to me,” claimed Adrienne. “I can always spot a liar.”

Theat guffawed at this.

“Is that amusing to you?” Adrienne asked, pressing her lips into a thin line.

“That depends,” theat began, “would you care to demonstrate?” He was enjoying this. “In my profession, part of becoming a character is believing you really are who you are pretending to be. Truly remarkable actors could lie to you all day long. And sociopaths–” he faltered, “well, it would be child’s play to them.”

Adrienne glanced away in thought for a moment.

“Fine,” she said. She stood directly in front of him, looking into his eyes.

“Well?” theat welcomed.

The room was momentarily silent.

“Why are you here, theat?” Adriene inquired. The tension in the air was palpable. “Why were you kidnapped and placed here?”

The others were silent. The smile dancing on theat’s lips slowly faded as he looked down.

“Well,” he began, “I can’t be sure. But if I had to guess, I would say it’s because of something I did as a teenager.” He winced, and then looked genuinely upset. “I…I used to go hunting with

my grandfather. I hated it. It just felt wrong. But my parents always prompted me to go with him, assured me that it was a good way to connect with the man. So I did what was expected of me."

Everyone was listening so intently that one could have heard a pin drop in the room. Theat's pained expression deepened.

"One day, I took a shot at a deer from a distance. It was all lined up just like I was taught: follow the leg up, aimed right at the vitals. So I looked through the scope and pulled the trigger. But at that moment, the deer moved and something else went down instead." He shed a tear and his lip quivered. "I…I killed a person. A man who was just kneeling down in the background, admiring the animal. My grandfather covered the whole thing up. He said we would never tell anyone." He sniffled and wiped his tears with his sleeve. "Well, he's dead now, too. But I guess I didn't keep that promise. Because now I've told all of you. And that's got to be why I'm here," he trailed off at the end, quiet.

The room digested this information tenderly.

Adrienne scrutinized him but then addressed him with an air of empathy. "I'm sorry you experienced that, theat. The guilt must have been overwhelming all of these years. But at least you can begin to heal now that you've gotten it out. You're no longer alone with that burden." She smiles at him earnestly.

"Hmm…interesting," theat replied in thought.

"Well? Aren't you going to tell me I'm right?"

The actor could barely contain his smirk.

"Why? Shouldn't you already know?" And then he burst into boisterous laughter and walked away from the group, leaving the psychologist blushing a crimson hue of defeat.

* * *

Nick's heart dropped like an anchor. He felt nothing and everything at once. He gazed into the glass, the reflection of his own face warped and distorted, and he realized that he hated what he saw. In an instant he threw the glass with all his strength into the wall, hoping that the pain would ease by watching something else shatter too. He collapsed against the wall and sunk down slowly, spasmodic sobs bursting out of his stomach. Wrapping his arms around himself, hoping

to feel okay again. Hoping it wouldn't take too long this time for the light to appear at the end of the tunnel.

* * *

[Write a scene with each character to see how they react in this situation: they are at a diner either alone or with someone else. They witness another guest of the diner being extremely rude to their waitress.]

The diner was rather busier than usual for a Monday afternoon. Nick sat in the booth with his legs crossed reading a mystery novel. A steaming mug of hot chamomile tea cooled before him. Subconsciously, he reached for it and, once he was certain the temperature was just right, he took a sip.

His waitress made her way back over to him.

"How's the tea, hun?" she inquired in an adorable Brooklyn accent. Nick glanced up at her. She had sandy blonde hair tied back in a bun, a petite frame, and gorgeous brown eyes. He admired the way she clasped her hands behind her back when she asked the question—a vulnerable position, one in which you welcomed an honest answer. As she stood there with a calm fortitude, he could tell by her smile: this woman took pride in her work.

"It's just right, thank you," he replied sweetly and gave her his signature charming smirk. She glowed at him and then walked on.

His novel was beginning to reach its climax. It was a modern mystery, written by someone who was clearly a fan of Agatha Christie. So many potential suspects, all with a clear motive, but only one could be responsible. And Nick was quite sure he knew who that was. He usually did.

Raised voices from across the diner disturbed his fictional escape. He lowered his book and noticed a verbal altercation had erupted between his waitress and one of the other diner patrons.

"I'm doin' the best I can, sir, but we're understaffed and I can't make the food cook faster-"

"If I wanted excuses, I would have ordered them instead," he interrupted her loudly in a Southern drawl. "Pancakes are pancakes, they don't take that damn long to cook! I've been sittin' here twenty minutes and it's ridiculous. I wanna speak to a manager."

"I do apologize, sir, my manager is out today but I am the shift lead. And like I said, the food can't magically-"

“Then you best get back there and help out,” he gesticulated violently with his hands. “Lord knows it’s better use for you than walkin’ around smilin’ at everyone out here. We already know you’re pretty, we don’t need reminded.”

She walked away at this, right past Nick’s booth. Though she attempted to wipe them away, he could see the persistent tears cascade down her face.

The rude man stood up and called across the diner.

“Where ya goin’? I ain’t done talkin’ ta you!”

He trundled off in her direction, though he couldn’t hope to match her speed. He was a great big man, probably weighing several hundred pounds. He nearly lumbered past Nick’s booth but then he stopped, his gaze captured by Nick’s. Nick had been eyeing him down ever since the man stood.

“And whadda *you* want?” he goaded. The man had on filthy overalls, a shaggy beard and greasy hair. He stood in front of Nick’s table with his hands on his hips, the look of a defiant child.

“I could ask you the same,” Nick replied coolly. “You seem awfully eager to have some pancakes for someone who doesn’t need anything more to eat.”

The diner went quiet, its patrons hoping to soak up every word. Nick spoke only to the man, but his normal tone of voice carried.

“What’d you say?” the man threatened with a raised voice, cracking his knuckles.

“Oh, come now, you heard me. You don’t really want me to repeat that, do you?” Nick said and he rose to meet the man. They were a similar height, but that’s about where the similarities ended. Nick stood only a few inches from him, arms crossed, eyes locked on his. He lowered his voice so that only he and the man could hear.

“You look like you want to hit me right now. And I sure hope you do because I *really* want a good excuse to hit you. And believe me, it’s not a fight you would win. So why don’t you hobble on out of here before you embarrass yourself further over pancakes?”

He held the man’s gaze without faltering. The man’s left eye twitched and, for a second, Nick thought the man might actually do the unthinkable. But he put his hands in his pockets, looked Nick up and down a few times, and then exited the building without a word.